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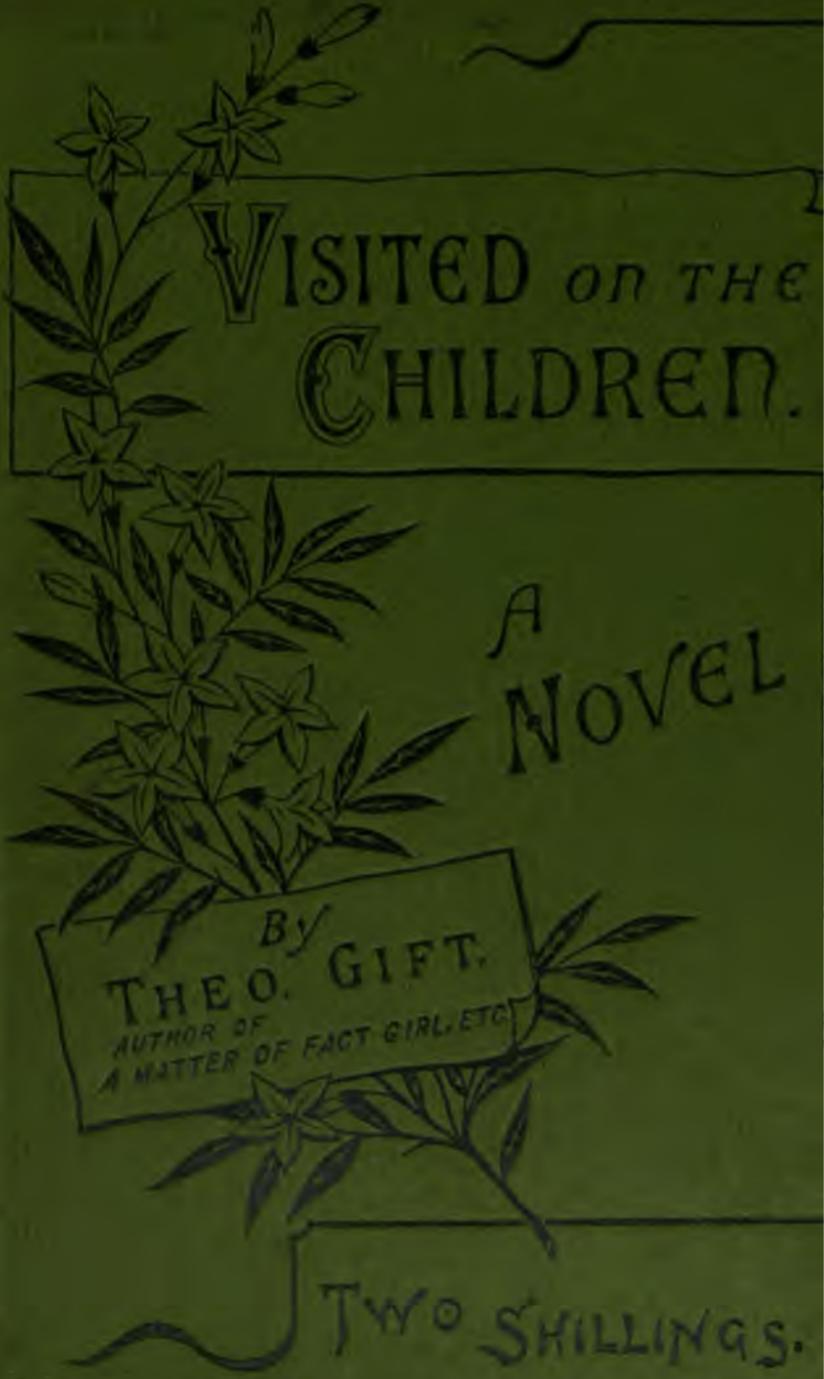
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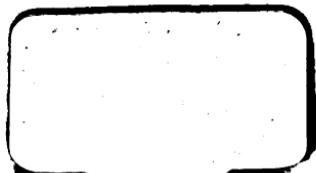
VISITED *on the* CHILDREN.

A NOVEL

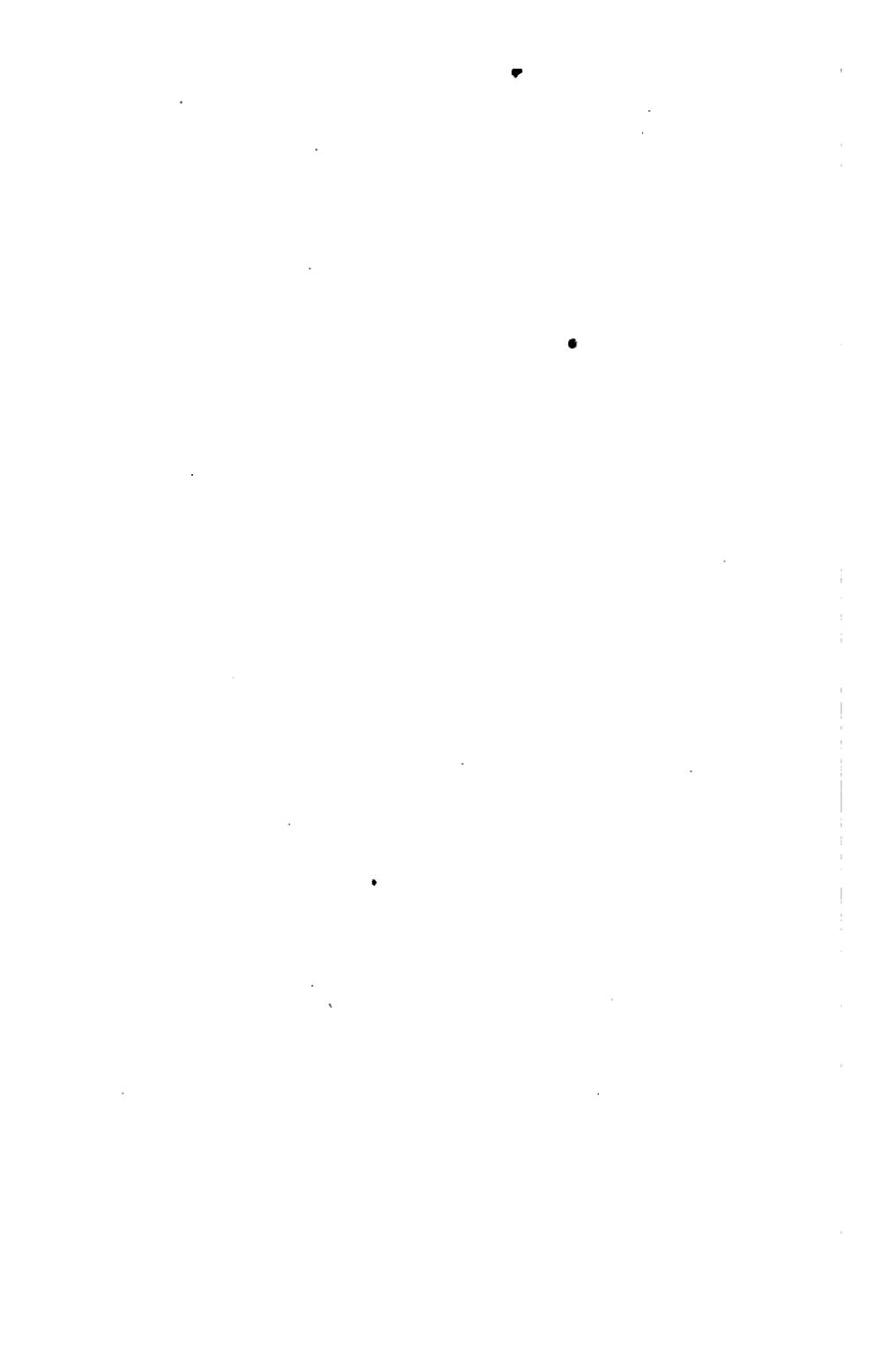
By
THEO. GIFT.

AUTHOR OF
A MATTER OF FACT GIRL, ETC.

TWO SHILLINGS.







VISITED ON THE CHILDREN.

A NOVEL.

BY

THEO GIFT,

AUTHOR OF 'A MATTER OF FACT GIRL,' ETC.

A New Edition.

TINSLEY BROTHERS,
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CONTENTS.



	PAGE
PROLOGUE,	1

Book I.

CHAP.

I. THE NEW TENANTS AT HILLBROW,	9
II. SYBIL,	18
III. WHAT CHADLEIGH END THOUGHT ABOUT IT,	27
IV. DIPLOMACY,	35
V. LION ASHLEIGH,	45

Book II.

I. THE FACE ON THE EASEL,	55
II. AN ILL-ASSORTED COUPLE,	65
III. POST-PRANDIAL,	72
IV. WIZARDS AND DRAGONS,	82
V. 'IT WAS THE TIME OF ROSES,'	91
VI. AT THE EDGE OF THE WOOD,	100

Book III.

I. IN CHADLEIGH CHURCH,	109
II. JENNY DIFFERS,	120
III. A NAME FROM THE GRAVE,	131

CHAP.		PAGE
IV. HERALDING SHADOWS,	• • • • •	142
V. UNTER DEN LINDEN,	• • • • •	153
VI. 'IT IS THE LITTLE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE,'	• • • •	163
VII. GARETH CONQUERS,	• • • • •	171
VIII. 'AND FAITH UNFAITHFUL MADE HIM FALSELY TRUE,'	• • • •	181

Book II.

I. LOVE'S OBSTINACY,	• • • • •	192
II. MRS DYSART'S CONFESSION,	• • • • •	202
III. COUNTERWEAVING,	• • • • •	214
IV. A NIGHT ON THE HEATH,	• • • • •	224
V. THE VACANT BERTH,	• • • • •	236

Book III.

I. 'WHOM SYBIL CHOOSES I WILL CHOOSE,'	• • • •	247
II. A BROKEN BUTTERFLY,	• • • • •	259
III. IN THE CURATE'S STUDY,	• • • • •	269
IV. JENNY'S BIRTHDAY VISITOR,	• • • • •	280
V. A BUNDLE OF NEWS,	• • • • •	290
VI. 'AND NATHAN SAID UNTO DAVID, THOU ART THE MAN,'	• • • •	301
VII. DR HAMILTON TELLS HIS STORY,	• • • • •	313
VIII. DR HAMILTON'S STORY CONTINUED,	• • • • •	324
IX. IN THE TRACK OF THE SETTING SUN,	• • • •	334



VISITED ON THE CHILDREN.

PROLOGUE.

ANY hope? Oh, ma'am, we wish there was! She's just dying as fast as she can. The doctor says it can't be more than an hour at most now.'

'The doctor?'

'Yes, ma'am; not Dr Hamilton, but the other one. He was 'ere three times yesterday, an' only left ten minutes ago; an' he said it won't be more than an hour now, for she's sinking fast, he said, and the 'stremities are getting cold already.'

A servant girl, the last speaker; her face, one pleasant and comely enough at other times, all swelled and blurred with tears, and her neat white muslin apron crumpled into a damp, untidy rag from the same cause, as she stands twisting it between her hands at the gate of one of those old-fashioned, creeper-covered cottages in the region of St John's Wood. To look at the house, indeed, it might be in the heart of the country, shut in as it is with fruit-trees and horse-chestnuts now in full blossom, and high garden walls overhung by closely-matted ivy and Virginian-creeper, rankly luxuriant of pale-green leaf and rosy-fingered tendrils; though in point of fact the quiet lane in which it stands, and in which there is not even a casual passer-by, is within three minutes' walk of 'Lord's,' and less than ten of one of the most noisy and crowded of London thoroughfares, the faint hum of which even penetrates to the gate where the little colloquy above narrated is taking place.

'There is a brougham waiting outside it. Not one of those tiny toy vehicles which you see drawn up beside the railings in the Row with a little group of men round it, and the head and shoulders of one favoured individual buried in its perfumed recesses as he exchanges chaff and flattery with the dainty-looking creature smothered in costly furs or laces within—not a brougham of this sort, with its almost suspicious spick-and-span newness, its young coachman, and the invariable black-muzzled pug hanging out a superfluous yard of red tongue from the off window; but a handsome, goodly-sized carriage, with a double crest on its panels, an elderly Jehu, wide of girth and grey of whisker, holding in the pair of fat bays who stand waving their glossy heads and stamping their feet in impatience at being kept so long; and a footman solemn and pompous enough for a bishop; an equipage altogether in keeping with the high-coloured, sternly-handsome face thrust far enough out of the window to be able to speak in a lowered tone to the maid already mentioned, and whose sobs have broken out again with her last words.

'Hope!' she repeats, crumpling her unfortunate apron still more as she dabs one corner of it into her eyes. 'Oh no! m'm; and such a dear young lady as she was, never a cross word to no one, and nursed me when I was ill once as if I'd been her own sister. Cook and me often says as we'll never get such another mistress nowhere; though cook never thought 'twould be long, for anyone could see death written in her sweet face. An' to think of her layin' dying up in her pretty room this minute, an' not even able to speak to master when he arrived! Oh dear! oh dear!'

If the girl were not crying so unaffectedly herself, the want of any answering sympathy in the face at the carriage window, untouched by either pity or sorrow, might have attracted her attention and caused her to modify the outward expression of her grief; but her face is hidden in her apron altogether now; and though even the wooden propriety of the fat coachman (himself a married man) is dashed with an extra shade of soberness at the thought that the lady, for whom his mistress has called to inquire, lies dying behind those white bedroom curtains puffing gently in the breeze up yonder, the rigid lines about that mistress's well-shaped mouth do not relax by so much as one hair's-breadth; only at the maid's last words a swift, dark flush, less like pain or sorrow than a flash of intense and angry repulsion, passes across her face

for a moment, to disappear as quickly again, however, as she asks,—

‘Your master is with—is upstairs at present, I suppose?’

‘Oh yes, ma’am. He’s never left ‘er since he got ‘ere, at about five o’clock this morning. We telegraphed for him before seven yesterday evening; but I suppose he were out somewhere and didn’t get it. Pore dear mistress! it was the death of her his not doing so; for that was how she brought on the second bleeding. She would keep asking,—“Has he come? Oh! do you think he is coming?” and starting up at every sound till she brought on another fit of coughing; and then when he did come she wasn’t even conscious of it, she was that far gone. It would ha’ broken your heart to see the look on his face when he found it was so.’

It does not seem to have that effect in the description to judge from the look on the lady’s face. She only asks, in the same quiet tone,—

‘And she—your mistress—has never spoken or been conscious since?’

‘Never once, ma’am, I believe; and Dr Beevor said ‘twasn’t likely now, that she might just sink away from exhaustion in the sort of half-sleep she was in, an’ no one know the minute she went—I beg your pardon, ma’am,’ checking herself suddenly, as if struck for the first time by the strange stony way in which she is listened to, ‘perhaps I oughtn’t to be talking this way; but I thought maybe you were an old friend of mistress, and hadn’t seen her for some time. I don’t remember seeing your face before, an’ I’ve been with ‘er nearly two months, but—’

‘You are quite right. I am an old friend, a very old one; though I have never been here before. Pray go on telling me all you can. This has been a great shock to me. I had hoped to see your mistress.’

‘Indeed, ma’am, I’m very sorry. It must be a great trouble to you, and a disappointment too; but Dr Beevor, he told us, an’ Dr Hamilton as well, that she mustn’t be disturbed for no one and nothink. And ten to one she wouldn’t know you, ma’am. Nurse said as she barely seemed to look at master, an’ every time I’ve gone near the dressing-room door—it’s left open, like the window, so as to give her plenty of air—she’s always been lying just the same; most as if she was dead already, an’ him kneeling beside her, poor soul! just as he’ve been since he first came in.’

The flush on the lady's cheek deepens a little, and for the first time there is a visible irresolution about the lines of her mouth. For a moment she hesitates; then, as the servant seems about to step backwards, leans a little more forward, and addresses her in a lower, more hurried tone.

'You say the door is open. I have come a long way—from the country, indeed. You will understand what it would be to you if you had done so, and only to be too late. Do you think I could just stand at the door for one second? One look would be enough.'

'Indeed, ma'am, I hardly know. I'm very sorry; but—' the girl is beginning, somewhat embarrassed by the request, when she is interrupted.

'You need not fear being blamed,' the visitor says, in a manner slightly more urgent, not to say imperious, than before. 'I would not ask you if I had not the—right. I am more than a friend. I am a near relation. Your master would tell you so if he saw me; but it would be cruel to disturb him now; and I need not assure you that I will not run the very smallest risk of rousing her—your mistress.'

'Oh! as to rousing her, ma'am'—there are still tears in the girl's eyes, but they brighten, nevertheless. What more natural to the minds of the lower orders than the desire to look on death in any form and for any reason? Sarah has crept to the dressing-room door a dozen times already; and for all her unaffected love and sorrow for her young mistress, there is something not unpleasantly exciting in being able to take another person there—'she's past rousing now, poor dear! if you'll excuse me speaking so free; an' as for him, I don't believe he'd hear a cannon-shot if you fired it off at his ears.'

'Then I will go in. It will only be for one look,' the lady says, determinately, and, opening the carriage-door, alights before Sarah has time to reconsider her semi-permission. It is too late now to do so, for with a brief 'Drive up and down till I come out,' to the coachman, her interlocutor turns to her, adding, simply, 'I will follow you,' and does so accordingly, through the green door in the wall, and into the garden within.

A pretty, old-fashioned garden full of pretty, old-fashioned, sweet-smelling flowers: a garden that, like the house, might have grown up miles and miles away from London soot and smoke and turmoil, instead of here on the very outskirts of it. Low wicker chairs (two of them), under the big thorn-tree on the lawn, now shadowed over with a scented snow of blossoms;

a work-basket with a bit of knitting lying forgotten on the velvety grass ; a rustic table of twisted wood holding a cracked majolica ash-tray ; all this she sees at a glance, and draws a fancy picture of two people strolling out after dinner through the French windows of the pretty little drawing-room, with its dim, green walls hung with pictures of sunlit forest glades by Pickering, and photographs in dead-gold mounts of Albert Moore's classic nymphs, to enjoy the evening air and talk over the day's work and pleasures—work and pleasures both sweet in their kind, both falling, falling fast with the last moments of life from the dying woman upstairs, as the sweet, white blossoms of the may keep falling, falling on the grass below. The tall lady's dark eyes—eyes with unusually thick, level brows above them—note silently the whole sad little picture, and more—note the canary singing its little yellow heart out from its gilt cage in the tiny verandah, and the stands of flowers in the square, well-warmed hall ; note the dainty water-colours adorning the staircase, the graceful ferns and gleaming gold-fish in the window on the landing : all the thousand-and-one trifles, which show that much love and not a little taste and money have gone hand in hand to furnish a nest for some precious one ; and a strangely bitter expression comes over the handsome face and hardens the observing eye.

Not that she has any look of being poor or wanting in care and taste herself ! Her lead-coloured gown is of cashmere, so fine and soft that its voluminous train and floundings make no slightest rustling as she sweeps the carpet. The lace on her mantle is from Brussels, half a yard in depth, and costly enough to make a miser's mouth water. The very sombreness and almost severity of her attire, which would be better suited to a woman of forty than one of eight-and-twenty, which is all she really is, speaks, more than her haughty bearing and fat carriage horses, for the owner being a person not only possessed of wealthy surroundings, but accustomed to them all her life. Has love never mingled with her cup of luxury ? Or is it only the thought that love, as little as money, can purchase one half-hour's more grace to the young life before which both have been laid, that makes her lip curl for a moment in a half smile of scorn ? Hard to answer this sort of question !

Stepping softly on the points of her toes, and even holding her breath to make no sound, the maid leads the way to a small room furnished as a dressing-room, daintily and prettily, like the rest of the house, but now littered over with the appli-

ances of a sick-chamber, medicine bottles and glasses, an open medicine-chest, a man's hat and overcoat lying on a chair ; and stopping short, points with her forefinger to an inner door beyond.

'That's her room,' she whispers very low. 'I won't go in with you, ma'am ; they might hear ; and please step softly. You won't stay long ?'

'I will only stay for one look. They will not see or hear me. I will be very careful ; don't be afraid.'

The lady speaks in the same tone, but with a firmness which, if the girl were afraid of her composure giving way, must be reassuring. There is no time for more, for in the next moment she has passed into the room, and is standing gazing through the half-open door into the sorrowful chamber within.

Darker there ! So dark, indeed, that at first, and coming out of the sunlight, she can only make out a tent bedstead, hung with cloudy white draperies, and with something like a streak of golden light flung across the pillows at the head of it. Then, as her eyes grow accustomed to the dimness, they see more : a small face, white as the pillows themselves, beneath that wave of golden hair, and something dark—a man's head —buried in the sheets beside it. There is no sound in the room, save a faint, laboured breathing, and now and then a gasping sob wrung from the watcher as he kneels there, feeling the last pulsations of the heart, against which his brow rests, grow fainter and fainter till they seem to flag and stop altogether. Then—all of a sudden—there is a rally, a quick pulse or two, a fluttering of the lips over which death has already cast a pale blue tinge ; and a sound too low for its meaning to be distinguishable by any but the one for whom it is meant, and who lifts his head quickly, his haggard, feverish eyes fixed in hungry yearning on those whose pale lids are lifted at last in a parting look of recognition. Yet he does not speak. He seems afraid to do anything but look at, and fold his arms closer round her, till she says his name again, a little louder. Even the unseen visitor still standing by the door can hear the words.

'John ! You came—at last.'

'My own darling, if I could but have reached you sooner ! If I had only known ! But I never got your telegram till this morning. I had no idea—Would to God it had not been needed—that I could have stayed with you always, and taken care of you !'

'If—I get well you will.'

No answer this time. Difficult indeed to give any to such a speech, when looking at the speaker one can see the finger of death travelling from the faltering lips down to the flagging heart, and can almost count the seconds it will take to reach there ; but the girl herself misunderstands the silence, and the dying voice takes a sharper tone.

'You said so—"in the summer—when you get well ;" and it will soon be summer now. I—dear, don't—don't look that way. I *will* get well. I—John, keep me, hold me, don't let me go, or—'

The pitiful appeal, rising gradually into a sob, half terrified, half tender, breaks off suddenly into a weak, strangled cry. There is a little stir and confusion in the room, a sound of someone rising to his feet, of pouring water, of a few half-smothered sounds, but what is doing or passing the unmoved witness at the dressing-room door cannot see ; for, fearful of being seen herself, she has drawn back from the opening, one hand clutching the folds of her gown, the other pressed against her lips as if to keep down even a rising breath, lest it interfere with her sense of hearing.

No need for that. The silence which follows speaks more loudly than any tongue, and is only broken by a sound terrible to most women's ears, overmastering even this one's composure, and turning her face to the whiteness of that one upon the pillow within—the agony of a strong man's grief.

'Amy ! Amy ! My darling ! my only love, my own—' the voice breaking off between every tender epithet as he pours down passionate kisses on the lips where that finger now rests never to be lifted. 'Oh, my God, pity me ! I can't lose you. Amy, my one love, try to look at me. My—'

There is a sound on the staircase outside. Sarah has been telling the nurse that one of mistress's relations—those relations only vaguely heard of hitherto, and who have never before visited the delicate young girl in her pretty home—is upstairs now—has begged leave just to look in on the dying one ; and nurse and cook are both of opinion that Sarah is much to blame, and it is 'like her foolishness' to dream of permitting such a thing. 'A grand lady in a kerridge an' pair, indeed ! And what if she were ? More shame to her never to ha' come here to see mistress before, pore dear ! An' she just dyin', as anyone could see with 'arf an eye, for months back. Anyone but Sarah would ha' told the lady so ;' and nurse feels it to be

her duty to go upstairs at once lest the quiet of the sick-room may have been disturbed even now by any unauthorised intrusion. The little colloquy has not lasted six minutes, and the two women, Sarah following nurse in much contrition of spirit, are almost at the top of the stairs, when the tall lady comes quietly out of the dressing-room and advances to meet them with the same stately ease of step and manner which had overcome the little maid's scruples before.

Even the nurse, always the most important person in a sick house, is impressed by it, and in place of the indignant remonstrance on her lips, is commencing one much milder.

'Ma'am, you ought not to have been shown up. My poor young mistress is—' when she is interrupted.

'Your mistress is *dead*, I think,' the lady says, calmly. 'You had better go in to her. You may be wanted.' And so, with hardly a glance at the horrified faces of the two women, or so much as a word of softening or explanation, she passes them both and goes quietly down the stairs and out into the smooth green lawn again, where the sweet white may-blossoms are falling, and the fragrant lilacs and golden laburnum boughs are tossing and swaying in the breeze. Her carriage is just outside the door, and the footman jumps down and holds the door open obsequiously; perhaps with a little added *empressement* because of the change in his mistress's face since he last saw it. Did anything living ever look at him out of such a dead-white mask, even the very lips blanched to a kind of ashen lividness?

'Where to, ma'am?'

A moment's hesitation. The birds are singing loudly among the rose-white spires of the horse-chestnut blossoms. The drawn curtains of that open window above are puffing and fluttering in the wind like a white flag of truce. John Thomas wonders if his mistress is going to faint, and, so wondering, manages with well-trained propriety to banish every vestige of expression from his face. Then, with an effort, she recovers herself, and answers him,—

'To Charing Cross Station.'

They drive there accordingly, and the lady alights, then turns on the step to give a further order.

'I am going back by train. You will return to the house we have just come from, and send in word that Dr Hamilton's carriage has called for him. He will be there by then, I expect, and will probably like to come back with you. If he

should not be ready, you must wait for him. It does not matter if the horses are kept out rather long for once. Stay ; you are to give him this.'

'This' is a note, on the outside of which the doctor's name is written in pencil ; and as the servant takes it his mistress turns from him and enters the station, her handsome head erect, her handsome dress sweeping behind her, her step and bearing as stately and composed as though she had but come from some ordinary call of ceremony ; but wearing that same white mask pressed down upon her face as though Death itself had branded it there : the sign-manual of some unhallowed act never to be taken away or obliterated on this side of the grave.

And—we shall meet her again years later and note it for ourselves—it never is.

Book I.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW TENANTS AT HILLBROW.

A HOUSE with many gables, standing on the edge of one of the many roads between Epsom and Dorking, and only separated from the same by a thick laurel hedge, tall enough to conceal the lower windows altogether. A pleasant, old-fashioned house, covered up with creepers of every sort : wistaria, with its pale-green leaves and bunches of lilac bloom, roses red and white, and ivy binding it close and warm in an evergreen mantle through every change of season. A low, rambling, non-pettentious building, with quaint little lattice-paned windows set under the eaves, an overhanging red-tiled roof, and a little village of outbuildings like a succession of after-thoughts.

That is Hillbrow !

And until Mrs Dysart and her daughters came to live there that was about all that anybody knew of Hillbrow : neither the house nor its associations being at all interesting or admirable to the generality of the inhabitants of Chadleigh End, the village to which (though keeping its distance) it rightfully be-

longed. What was there after all in a dull, shabby-looking old house, almost hidden behind a hideous laurel hedge, and exposed to all the vulgar dust and noise coming from the highroad? Chadleigh End, with its mingling of suburbanism and rusticity, its picturesque cottages and brand-new Gothic villas, looked down on the ramshackle old house with distasteful contempt, and would fain have seen it blotted out altogether in favour of some gentleman's mansion 'with all the newest improvements'; yet had it a history of its own, notwithstanding, and one perchance of more interest to the antiquarian than many of the more comely dwellings in the neighbourhood.

Once in its time—a long time ago now—Hillbrow had been a wayside inn, and rejoiced in the name of the King's Lion; meaning (so chronicles testified) the King's Sirloin; but which name time, and the tongues of Surrey yokels, had corrupted into the form above given; and in the days of Epsom Wells, and of the merry monarch who knighted the joint aforesaid, it was a place much frequented by people who were called into the neighbourhood by the fame of the Epsom waters, but who had either found no room in that gay little town itself, or preferred the rustic quiet and liberty of this homely resting-place. Travellers too, wending their way on horseback between London and the small township of Leatherhead, with its—now long defunct—aroma of hides and tanpits, stopped to bait their steeds for the last time at the little hostelry, or to wash the dust from their own throats with a draught of that good strong ale for which the village of Chadleigh End was then as much noted as Cheam for 'juicy beef,' or as an old Surrey rhyme goes—

‘Sutton for good mutton,
Cheam for juicy beef,
Carshalton for a pretty girl,
And Ewell for a thief.’

Tramps stayed to rest their weary limbs on the long bench which stood under the eaves when no churlish hedge raised a screen between house and road. Grand gentlemen, in powdered wigs and scarlet coats laced with gold, put up there in the winter, when Chadleigh Hall was too crammed with other guests for the hunting season for its owners to find room for them (and, indeed, the said gentry were not ill-pleased at the exchange; the serving-wenches at the inn being comelier, more roguish of eye and willing of speech, than those within the mossy park-wall which bordered the other side of the road for

three-quarters of a mile), so that altogether the hostel drove a thriving trade, and had its stables noisy with stamping steeds and shouting ostlers, and its cowsheds stocked with the sleek well-conditioned animals from which its guests were provided with such cream and butter as not the Hall itself could rival.

But these were days long past and over now—so long that few people in the neighbourhood even knew that they had existed, or that the house had ever borne another name from that by which it was known at present. The half-hatch doors and latticed casements had given way on the ground-floor to French windows, and the bowling-alley to a croquet-lawn. The long bench was gone, and the laurel hedge raised instead; and though the roomy stables and outbuildings were still in existence, they were for the most part grass-grown and untenanted, save by Sybil's pony and Jenny's tame rabbits; while the whole establishment over which Mrs Dysart reigned, and by whose aid she had contrived to so alter and improve the place within doors that it had gradually become one of the prettiest and most tasteful in the neighbourhood, consisted of two maids and an odd man of uncertain age, and occupation varying from gardener to groom and upholsterer.

'But though the Dysarts are not well off they are such thoroughly *nice* people.' So the fine ladies about Chadleigh End would say. 'Quiet people to know. Oh, we never were inside the house before they took it. No one could, you know, after the horrors that used to be there. But these people are quite different; cousins of Lord Dysart's, the Shropshire Dysarts. Everybody knows *them*.' Which, whether everyone did or not, settled the question, and proved the new inhabitants of Hillbrow to be in every way desirable.

As for the 'horrors' alluded to, they were simply these: After being unlet for some time, and getting into a very dilapidated condition, the house had fallen into the hands of people whom no one knew, or wanted to know; some plebeian Smith, who might have come from Shropshire or any other place; but who was certainly not connected with any noble family, and who used to drink freely at Epsom, being frequently met with in a maudlin condition on his way home; while when these were gone it became the home of some even more plebeian Wigginses, whereof the husband did worse than drink; he kept a butcher's shop at Ewell, while his wife washed at home and gave the public generally a liberal view of the nine little Wigginses' shirts, socks, and frilled unmentionables fluttering

in a damp and distended condition above the laurel hedge. Poor Mrs Wiggins died there, and after that the house remained unlet for a long time. It had got a bad name ; and when at last a quiet couple took it for a year, not a soul in the vicinity called on or took any notice of them ; and they departed at the end of their time without having seen any more of their neighbours than a general view of bonnets and back-hair in church, and an even vaguer one of the tradesmen who called for orders at the back-door. Then, when they were gone, and had shaken the dust of the inhospitable village off their feet, dirt and darkness again reigned in the empty rooms at Hillbrown, and remained there till, one fine day about a twelvemonth later, Mrs Dysart came to look at them, and a week afterwards returned with the rest of her household and took possession of the place.

Nothing could have been quieter than their advent. It was some little while indeed before people recognised that the big board with 'To Let' on it, so long peering over the laurel hedge, had been deposed from its position ; and even then the simple fact of a widow with two little girls coming to live in a house with a bad name, and giving no hostages to respectability in the shape of carriage or men-servants, was not of sufficient promise to warrant the new tenants' eligibility. Most people, when they come to reside in a country place, know, or are known to, someone in that place before. Women in especial have seldom courage enough to settle down in a new spot where they are certain of finding none but strangers ; but no single individual in Chadleigh End knew anything at all about Mrs Dysart before her arrival, or could remember ever having heard anything about her even after that event. She might be the widow of a dancing-master or a dog doctor. She might not be a widow at all—or a wife ! All sorts of damnable possibilities connected themselves naturally in the feminine mind with the advent of a solitary woman wearing deep mourning, and who kept herself so closely indoors that she was not even to be seen in church, or taking an airing with her daughters along the pretty lanes about her house. Anyhow it was safer to wait a while and endeavour to find out something about her antecedents and previous history before risking the showing of any kindness to her ; and so it might have come to pass that Mrs Dysart would have been as completely ostracised as her innocent predecessors, but that one day a little event happened which brought her into sudden notice.

One frosty afternoon in January a red-faced old gentleman in a mail-phæton, with a groom behind him, drove into Chадleigh End, and drew up at the Cock and Bottle to ask the way to Hillbrow, Mrs Dysart's house. The groom jumped down to make the inquiry, and then sprang into his place again, after which the mail-phæton dashed on, and nothing more was seen of it or its occupants till they all passed through and out of the village again a couple of hours later. Brief, however, as had been their stay, and simple the query and answer, something had been seen and uttered of such magical potency as has before now served to cover shame and conceal disgrace; nay, even to condone offences of yet darker dye than the convivial propensities of the departed Smith, or the plebeian clothes-line dangling above the Wigginses' garden fence. There was an earl's coronet painted on the mail-phæton; and in addressing its owner the groom had said—and said twice over and quite distinctly, 'My lord!'

After this, though Mrs Dysart's moral character still remained hovering over the pit of some dark and condemnable probability (for who could tell what her connection with the venerable nobleman might be?) her social status received an immediate elevation. In place of being simply ignored, she became worthy to be talked about, commented on, and wondered over; and when a few days later it was reported that the carriage from Dilworth Hall, a fine old place about six miles off, had been seen leaving Hillbrow with Lady Ashleigh, and her sister-in-law, the rector of Dilworth's wife—stately dames both, whose bow was an object of envy and delight—seated in it and nodding farewell to the two little fair-haired Dysart girls, the whole tide of public opinion changed on the moment. Mrs Dysart became a person to be cultivated and sought after, and soon showers of cards were left at the long-shunned door by finely-dressed ladies in stylish phætons and victorias; and people might be heard talking in dulcet tones of 'our new neighbour: such a sweet woman. Niece to Lord Dysart, you know;' and deplored her delicate health and recent widowhood as reasons for the lady in question never being met with at their houses.

For, if society chose to extend a welcoming hand to Mrs Dysart, she extended none in return. Few of those who called on her got beyond the door; and of those who did still fewer had their calls returned.

'I am such a poor creature at walking, I must ask you to

excuse my calling on you,' she would say to one friendly visitor ; and to another, 'I have no governess for my daughters, so I feel bound to devote myself to them instead of society. I never leave them.' And indeed it was true, she very seldom did ; and, in their early youth at all events, spent her time in superintending their education, seeing to the well-being and beautifying of her house and garden, or lying on a low couch in the drawing-room, gazing out at the view, and dreaming somewhat sad day-dreams, to judge from the expression of her face, until either the voices or the sudden appearance of her two pretty, bright-eyed children drove the shadows from her brow and banished the memories which brought them there.

But, indeed, despite its churlish hedge and darkened frontage, Hillbrow was by no means a gloomy house. It stood on a hill, as the name suggested, and from the French windows of the drawing-room the garden sloped downwards in a succession of bright flower-beds and terraced walks, from which you had a wide view of green meadows studded with trees, almost like a gentleman's park, and stretching away to the edge of Chadleigh Heath—a long, broken, gorse-clad expanse of country, rising gradually into a ridge crowned by dark oak woods.

Nothing very particular, perhaps, in the way of a view ; no water and no mountains, but pleasant enough in summer, when the meadows were like green velvet, dotted over with little, white, woolly sheep, or mild-eyed cattle, flecking their flat brown sides as they browsed under the shade of the big horse-chestnut trees, and the inmates of Hillbrow sat out of doors, or in the pretty verandah, with its light supporting pillars wreathed with purple clematis and climbing yellow roses. Pleasant even in winter, when fields and common were a waste of snow, and the bare brown trees stood out in dark relief against a frosty blue sky ; or when the moon, rising behind the fretted boughs, cast the shadow of their tracery black and sharp upon the white expanse beneath.

It was so open, too ; for from this side of the house there was not another dwelling in sight, look where you would, and this circumstance was particularly pleasing to Mrs Dysart, whose taste for seclusion would have made the view of neighbouring roof-trees and chimneys rather an annoyance than a pleasure to her, as suggesting the proximity of those whose advances and invitations she declined with an unwavering obstinacy which would have been rude in anyone less consistently graceful and courteous in her manner.

The strange part of the matter was that the advances continued to be made and the invitations to be given, although open-handed hospitality and friendliness were virtues by no means either common or popular in the neighbourhood.

Perhaps it was hardly likely that they should be so. A village less than twenty miles distant from London, to which people come down every evening from the City, returning to business again in the morning, is so liable to be overrun by persons of all and every class, from retired publicans to pretty horsebreakers *en retraite*, and the people established in it are of such heterogeneous and incongruous elements already, that unsuspicious kindness or cordiality become matters so difficult of practice as to be almost obsolete; and of such places Chadleigh End was rather a shining example than an exception. The rich people who had made their money and retired long ago to enjoy themselves in dignified idleness naturally held themselves far above the rich people who were making money still, and whose barouches and waggonettes made a little confusion every morning and evening in the dusty road outside the small station; and the rich people who were making money did not care to associate with the poorer ones who were trying to make it, generally opining that the ill-success of the latter was owing to something 'shady'; while the very few county people who had not yet been 'crowded out' by cockney villas, or bought out by railway companies, kept themselves jealously aloof from all three of the above-mentioned classes; and the harmless village people made yet another little coterie of their own wherein they lived and moved, ignored by their 'towny' neighbours and ignorant of the latter's doings; the very clergy in the place knowing almost as little of their oddly-assorted parishioners as the incumbent of a West End living does of his.

What then was the reason that in a semi-suburban village so constituted Mrs Dysart should gradually have become, in a quiet and mysterious way, one of the most highly considered people in the neighbourhood?

She had certainly no claim to being so according to the prevailing code of the place; and she made none. She was not rich, even the little improvements at Hillbrow being only made by slow degrees and at the smallest cost consistent with thoroughness. She never entertained, and declined all gaieties. Mr Dysart, as was soon ascertained, had held no higher position in the world than a consulship in some unim-

portant continental town ; and as for Lord Dysart, if that venerable peer really were her husband's uncle, that first visit which he paid to his niece-in-law was also his last. Neither were his high-stepping bays or coroneted phaeton ever again seen in the village of Chadleigh End.

What did make the widow and her daughters so much sought after ?

In very truth she herself did not know, and (unfeminine as it may seem) regarded with more impatience than gratitude the courtesies and attentions which were lavished upon her.

'You are very kind ; but I do not give dinner-parties myself, and therefore I never go to them,' she said, even to Mrs de Boonyen, who was quite one of the biggest people in the place, when that female potentiaty drove over herself to invite her to dinner ; and Mrs de Boonyen could hardly believe her ears. The De Boonyens had a 'place,' with I don't know how many acres of land attached to it. Their show grape-houses and monster pines, their army of gardeners and regiment of cooks, were inflicted on you *ad nauseam* before and after every one of the gorgeous entertainments at which they were wont to feed their wealthy neighbours. Young De Boonyen was at Cambridge, and kept hunters. His sisters had their dresses from Wörth, and were only permitted to drive about in state in a large family barouche, their tow-coloured hair and little flat plebeian faces hardly visible above the heap of costly rugs piled about them. The De Boonyen footmen were taller and their livery more gorgeous, and the crest on their carriage panels larger than those of any other family in the county ; and though it is true that evilly-disposed persons averred that their name was not to be found in the magic pages of Burke and Debrett, and were wont to trace both it and their wealth to a well-known quack remedy known as 'Bunion's Balm for Corns,' with which we are all familiar from that picture by Miss Claxton, of a finely-arched foot badly disfigured about the toes, and the legend in huge letters, 'No more Corns ! Try Bunion's Embrocation. In Bottles One Shilling and Three Halfpence ;' or that yet more touching appeal, '*Why go about limping and in pain ? Bunion's Patent Balm cures thousands daily. See Testimonials below !*' the owners of Hapsburg Hall disclaimed all such connection as a basely-invented libel. *Bunion*, indeed ! There might be any amount of

common, vulgar Bunions in England ; but where did you ever find anyone of the name of De Boonyen connected with corns or embrocations ? Even the servant-maids at Hapsburg Hall were not allowed to find alleviation in the objectionable balm above alluded to ; the eldest Miss De Boonyen walked about with a decided limp ; and Albert Edward, the son and heir, was fond of advertising to some Hugo De Boonyen, a valiant knight of Flanders in the mediaeval ages, as the legitimate founder of their family tree ; while one of the younger boys had been christened Hugo in confirmation thereof.

That boy suffered somewhat severely at Eton (where he went by the name of 'Ugo (you go) Limping, or Balmy Corns) on the occasion of his once boasting of his knightly ancestor ; and the panels of Albert Edward's 'oak' at Christchurch were found one morning emblazoned with a coat-of-arms representing a negro's foot, sable, bearing an enormous bunion, gules, and surmounted by a bottle of embrocation rampant, the latter being particularly neatly executed. But this has nothing to do with my story ; and after all, there is no accounting for the low wit of schoolboys or undergraduates, or for the origin of such idle rumours as that Mr De Boonyen himself was given to dropping the letter H in familiar conversation, and even once or twice to so strangely forgetting himself as to have commenced to sign his name with the plebeian letters of the house whose balm—and a very excellent one—was a fluid not even to be named within the grounds of Hapsburg Hall.

As things were, the family of De Boonyen was a very magnificent one, and to eat of their dinners was a subject of elation among many of those admitted to that favour ; and therefore when Mrs De Boonyen was met with so decided a refusal from the pale, quiet, not even pretty widow, whom she herself had condescended to bid to her feast, her surprise may be better imagined than described. Indeed, it was not till after a moment's cogitation as to what could be the hidden motive for such immense self-denial, that the great lady, glancing at her hostess's well-worn black silk, went on to observe, in the most affable manner, that Mrs Dysart need not be afraid about dress. This was not one of their large parties, only a little dinner of twelve or so ; and really, as she sometimes said to her daughters, 'when you are in mourning, people never notice what you have on.'

A slight, a very slight curl came to the corners of Mrs

Dysart's mouth during this speech ; but she was patient, and did not even draw herself up as she answered, with a modest gentleness which was almost edifying, that Mrs De Boonyen was most kind. To speak the truth, that difficulty had not occurred to herself, probably (with a slight smile, which the guest took as deprecatory of the difference between their positions), because she had never been in the habit of going into society where her dress could be a matter of any importance. Of course the case was widely different with Mrs De Boonyen and her friends ; yet even, with the former's kind indulgence, she must still repeat her former refusal. And as similar invitations from other people met with a similar answer, it is to be supposed that Mrs Dysart did prefer to eat her beef and mutton at home, instead of at the houses of her friends ; and, indeed, to lead a somewhat recluse life altogether.

C H A P T E R II.

S Y B I L

AND here, I think, it is time to say something about the Dysart girls.

They had been still in the schoolroom when their mother first came to settle at Hillbrow—small damsels of eight and ten, wearing short frocks and sun-bonnets, and their fair hair plaited in pigtails ; but that was nearly ten years ago, and at the time when the present part of my story commences, Sybil had just reached her twentieth year, while Jenny (or Jane, as she was properly called) was not yet quite eighteen : slim, grey-eyed girls, both always dressed with a kind of exquisitely severe simplicity, and carrying their heads with an unconscious stateliness which somehow reminded you of tall white lilies swaying on their slender stems.

None knew much about them individually, for they were never seen apart, had never gone to school, and had been kept closely at home—first, as Mrs Dysart said, on account of their studies ; and next, because she did not go out herself, and disapproved of such young girls doing so without her. Many people, indeed, pitied them greatly, but the pity was wasted, for they had no consciousness of requiring it. They

were devotedly attached to their mother and to each other. They infinitely preferred their Surrey home and scenery to the dusty, sun-baked, monotonous Austrian town in which their early life had been spent ; and what with books, painting, and music within doors, and long country rambles without, were almost as well content with their life as the mother who had planned it for them. With her will, indeed, I doubt if they would have ever seen any change in it ; but even she, resolute as she was, could not manage matters quite as far as that, and, fortunately for the girls, there were people who interfered to prevent them from being reared in that total isolation from the outer world, which, if persisted in, would probably have led to their growing up either morbid or eccentric. These people were Lady Ashleigh of Dilworth and her sister-in-law.

It was no use for Mrs Dysart to tell them that she was unable to keep up any intimacy even with the latter, who had been a schoolfellow of her own in their girlish days, on the plea that Dilworth was quite out of calling distance unless you had a carriage, and she was not possessed of that luxury ; Mrs Ashleigh only answered,—‘ Then I shall come and see you instead, and bring Margaret with me. She has taken quite a fancy to you.’ And the two did so accordingly, calling at Hillbrow whenever they happened to be in the neighbourhood, and keeping up a constant little interchange of kindly note-writing and small offerings of fruit and flowers, against which even Mrs Dysart was not able, had she been willing, to steel herself.

Not that she went to Dilworth more than very, very rarely herself. She was invited often enough, and Lionel Ashleigh, the rector’s son, would drive over in the pony-carriage for her, or the brougham be sent from the Hall for the same purpose, only to return with a note from the widow, conveying her love and thanks, but she was too unwell or too busy to leave home ; but when good-natured Lady Ashleigh took pity on the two little soft-voiced girls, and insisted that they should be allowed to join in her own children’s croquet matches and birthday parties, the mother was not able to be so inexorable. And thus in course of time visits to Dilworth became the chief, if not the only, amusement and variety in the girls’ lives.

Mrs Ashleigh had no daughters of her own, and was rather brusque and stately of manner, having indeed the reputation of being the proudest woman in that part of Surrey ; so that Sybil and Jenny did not care quite so much for spending days

with her, or for going for drives in the Rectory carriage. In their youthful vernacular she was 'mamma's friend ;' but Lady Ashleigh, smiling, buxom, gossipy, and maternal, was a sort of second mamma herself, with nothing in the least awe-inspiring or redoubtable about her ; and as for Adelaide, her only daughter, she and Sybil struck up such a friendship that if it had not been for Mrs Dysart's restrictions they would have been almost inseparable, and, as it was, used to keep up a luminous correspondence and interchange of wonderful confidences and home-made presents after the most approved fashion of girlish intimacies. Seldom a week passed, never longer, without the young Dysarts and Ashleighs meeting either at Hillbrow or the Hall ; and when in course of time John Ashleigh, the eldest son, got engaged to some grand personage's daughter, and a ball was to be given at Dilworth in his *fiancée's* honour, nothing would suit Lady Ashleigh or Adelaide but that Sybil, who was then eighteen, should make her first appearance in company with the latter at the said entertainment.

'Ada has set her heart on it, and the girls are so nearly of an age, it would be nice for them to make their *début* together. You must give in to it some day or another, you know,' Lady Ashleigh said. And though Mrs Dysart demurred greatly, and would fain have refused altogether, she was not allowed to do so. John Ashleigh came over himself with a message from the Honourable Miss Victoria Plantagenet—of which I fear that high-born damsel was wholly unconscious—that she would be grievously hurt by Sybil's non-appearance ; and Adelaide entreated, and even Sybil, docile as she was in general, cried and coaxed, till at last Mrs Dysart gave way and consented. She knew after it was done that it would be no good trying to keep her choice rosebud hidden in the home garden any longer. She hated with all her heart to say the word which must open the gate and sanction its being seen by others. But after all, as the baronet's wife said, the thing would have to be done some day or another ; and if so, how could it be better than under Lady Ashleigh's own roof and chaperonage ?

She was right. The gates were opened, and the rosebud seen ; and after that there was no shutting up the pretty flower again for good. More little gaieties, both at Hall and Rectory, followed that first one in the Honourable Victoria's honour, and were succeeded by a host of return entertainments from the neighbourhood, including a gorgeous dinner-party at the

De Boonyens, and to all of these Sybil Dysart was invited as the newest and acknowledged beauty of the year.

She did not appear at them. Her mother sat down and wrote a little budget of refusals for her, one to Hapsburg Hall in especial, whereby Sybil was deprived of the pleasure of consuming peaches at half-a-guinea apiece and salmon at five-and-sixpence a pound ; but all the same the Rubicon had been passed, and henceforward, whenever any entertainment was on the tapis, the question as to whether Miss Dysart would be present was sure to be one of the chief subjects for discussion among the rest of the invited, and one which was answered sufficiently seldom in the affirmative for it to be never failing in interest. Indeed, unless Sybil was to go with one of the Ashleigh ladies, it was almost certain that she would not go at all ; as, failing every other excuse, Mrs Dysart had always the stock one that as she never went out herself, and Jenny was too young to share her sister's gaieties, it was pleasanter for the elder girl to stay at home than go to them by herself ; and as Mrs Ashleigh was too lazy to care about parties at all, and Lady Ashleigh, after her son's marriage, left Adelaide's chaperonage chiefly to him and the Honourable Victoria, this was what Sybil most frequently did.

It was an evening in late summer, and the close of an unusually sultry day, when the girl in question might have been seen making her way along an unfrequented road about midway between Leatherhead and the little village of Chadleigh End. She had on a dark blue linen dress and tippet, and a big black straw hat tied down securely under the softest, roundest little chin ever granted to a woman for the ensnaring of the unwarier sex, a hat which hid everything but a gleam of sunny hair coiled in a loose twist on the nape of her slender neck, and the glimmer of a pair of eyes so infinitely sweet and guileless in their liquid depths of greyish blue, that anyone gazing into them would have been more than stoic had he turned away and never looked again, yet would have taken the second glance with greater reverence than the first for the maidenly purity and frankness shining out of their serene unconsciousness of admiration.

Very pretty in truth was Sybil Dysart ; though I doubt if she had one remarkable feature in her small face ; grey-blue eyes and golden hair being as common as blackberries in this English land of ours : pretty in the supple grace of her slight

round figure, the sunshiny brightness of her expression, and the almost dazzling pearl-colour of her fair skin; too pretty to be walking alone; though it was indeed only by an unforeseen chance that such an event had occurred; and the path she was pursuing was so lonely a one that it was a rare event for anyone to be seen in it.

A good many years before, some rich man had bought all the land about here for building purposes, had cut out a long road across it, branching off into lateral ones at regular intervals, and planted young trees and shrubs along the borders of the intersecting meadow-land. It was to be a fashionable suburb to the old-fashioned town of Leatherhead; or, better still, to become a new town of itself, a town of handsome villa residences for the convenience of Londoners living in the country; and then— Well, somehow it never became anything at all! Perhaps land went down just at that time and the investment did not pay! or the owner died and the property went into Chancery. Anyhow it remained as it was., a long sloping hill cut up into fields of wheat or turnips, and intersected by broad lengthy roads, long since overgrown with grass and bordered by a narrow fringe of trees, chiefly firs and larches, which, after all these years, still proved the bleak unshelteredness of their situation by being as small and thin as though they had not been planted a twelvemonth.

Sybil had chosen this route in preference to returning home by the highroad along the valley beneath, because, though it was about three times as long as the latter, it was far more un-frequented, and as such likely to excuse her in her mother's eyes for being out at such a late hour alone.

‘But mamma ought not to be angry when I tell her how ill poor old Granny Smith was, and that she might have died if I had not stayed with her till her daughter came,’ the girl thought. ‘After all, one may be too particular. It will be dark before I get home, even by this road.’

It was getting dusk already, and she quickened her steps as she spoke, glancing somewhat anxiously at the sky around her. There had been a threatening feel in the air all day, but no rain had yet fallen. Above her head, indeed, and towards the east, the sky was still a pale blue, flecked only by little soft grey-white clouds; but all round the horizon was of an ominous leaden hue, rising higher and higher as the day declined; and the west was one vast expanse of dull flame-colour, deepening to bronze near the horizon, and covered with ragged grey

clouds. One of these latter, darker and inkier than the rest, and with torn and bleeding edges, concealed the sun from view ; but above and below it the rays of the sinking luminary darted out like the fingers of a fiery hand, behind whose burning touch the cloudy vapour around turned to a blaze of molten copper, while far in its depths you could see, by the glare of those giant fingers, the gleaming edges of yet more and more cloud-banks crowding back into the farther space beyond. Beneath this sky the lonely grass road cresting the hill took a yellow, mournful tinge ; the veined blossoms of the mallow turned to a faint unwholesome colour ; and the blackish-green berries of the woody nightshade, just changing here and there to scarlet, seemed to leap out of the hedgerows with a baleful gleam. There was a moaning sound among the spare dwarfish trees, as though the echoes of some terrible storm were pent within their branches. A dull-grey mist hung over Ashstead Common on one side, and creeping round, almost blotted out the square grey church-tower and red roofs of little Leatherhead in the valley, and stretched its pale arms even up the darkling slope of Fetcham Downs on the other side of the river : but grim old Raamoor, with its landmark steeple on the summit, loomed purplish-black and sharp against the sky ; and down in the valley the 'clank, clank' of a cattle-bell sounded like a note of solemn warning.

Involuntarily Sybil stood still and looked about her. There was something weird and unpleasant in the threatening loneliness of the scene, and she half meditated turning back and making her way to the highroad in the valley beneath. The impulse, however, was checked. The young lady had a very honest and deep-seated fear of tramps, and was well aware (which some of my town readers may not be) that this unpleasant waif of society is much more frequently to be met on the highroad than in lanes and byways ; and that in harvest-time and Derby week in particular it is almost impossible to walk along any of the main thoroughfares within five miles of Epsom without encountering some of the species prowling along either singly or in couples ; but always unwashed, evil-eyed, and surly, or sleeping off last night's potations by the roadside.

Thinking over these conflicting terrors, Sybil remained a moment or so stationary, her slim, upright figure in its straight blue gown relieved against the coppery sky, her head a little turned on one side, gazing wistfully down the steep, grass-grown

road leading to the valley ; but in the end the actual prevailed over the imaginary. Tramps were facts, and very terrifying and unpleasant ones, whereas the vaguely nervous feeling which made her shrink from pursuing this lonely hillside route had no tangible foundation whatever ; and just at that moment, to cheer her, she heard the crack of a sportsman's gun, and saw a covey of birds rise into the air, only a little way distant. The sound spoke to her of human companionship in the neighbourhood, and banished her terrors on the instant. She went on her way without any longer hesitating.

It was a solitary walk certainly. The deserted road stretched onward and upward till it reached the brow of the hill, and then crept away downwards again in one long, unbroken line. There was no house in sight, for the hedges and plantations on either side were just tall enough to shut out any view of the surrounding neighbourhood ; no sound but the moaning of the unfelt storm ; not even a second shot from the invisible sportsman ; and when she stopped for a moment to gather a tuft of tawny-yellow toad-flax from the wayside she was startled to notice how dusk it was getting, and that the sun and the fiery splendour had entirely disappeared behind a dense bank of cloud. She had a good distance still to go ; but by leaving the road, and striking across a turnip-field, she knew that it could be materially shortened, and she took that way accordingly, keeping well under the hedge, where a dry, grassy ditch made smoother walking for her pretty feet.

Unfortunately for Sybil she could not have done a more foolish thing ; for the hedgerow was more than high enough to conceal her graceful little figure from anyone on the other side ; and almost in the same moment there was a rustling sound low down in the fence, something dark burst out and dashed across her very feet, followed by a loud 'crack, crack,' so close to her that it sent a hot tingle through every vein in her body like an electric shock, and made her utter a sharp scream ; while simultaneously a big retriever crashed through the same hole in the hedge, and went tearing over the turnips after the flying object in front, which still kept on its way unhurt.

'Good God !' exclaimed a voice on the other side of the thorn-bushes. 'Is anyone there ? Have I hurt you ? For heaven's sake answer me if you can.'

There was no answer, however, for the simple reason that Sybil was quite unable to give one. The shot had not struck

her—had, indeed, almost miraculously spared her, perforating the bow on her hat, and whizzing within a hair's-breadth of her pretty face ; but the sudden shock and terror, coming on her previous nervous state, had for the moment been almost as bad, and she had sunk on to the grassy side of the ditch, half lying, half kneeling, and trembling in every limb and nerve as with an ague fit. She was not even conscious that anyone was speaking, until the speaker, rendered more anxious by the silence following on that sudden scream, had forced his way by sheer strength through the stiff brambles and was lifting her to her feet, the while he asked, in tones more full of concern than ever, if he had really shot her. Was she much hurt ? Would she not try to speak ?

Sybil did try then, and managed to stand up and stammer out a word or two of reassurance, but the effort brought on a nervous fit of crying, and she had to submit to be supported by one strong arm, while the other hand took off her hat and felt her fair little head and throat in very evident alarm and anxiety, until she could recover herself enough to falter the request,—

‘Please let me go. I can stand alone. I am not hurt ; I—
I am only frightened.’

‘Are you sure ?’ in a tone of great relief mingled with no little doubt. ‘Why, your hair smells of the powder ! Did none of the shot strike you ? My confounded carelessness ! I shall never forgive myself for it as it is ; but, indeed, I had no idea that anyone could be on this side of the hedge. Do tell me again that you are not hurt. Are you quite certain of it ?’

Poor Sybil began to feel horribly ashamed. Of all things in this world that Mrs Dysart most contemned and despised in girls was anything like affectation or display, or the capability of making ‘scenes,’ and to have shrieked out in this ridiculous way and then almost gone into hysterics, occasioning all this remorse and terror when she was not even touched, was too silly. What would mamma say ? And yet so shaken was she still that she could not help a little sob between every other word as she assured the unhappy culprit that, indeed, he had not hurt her. There was no harm done. It was only the shock, and she was very foolish to make such a fuss.

‘Pray don't say that. It was all my fault, and you are not making a fuss at all. How could you help being frightened ? Thank heaven it was not worse,’ the stranger exclaimed, almost

passionately ; and as he was still kneeling on one knee beside her and holding her shaking hands in his, Sybil could not help looking in his face as she lifted her own, with a pale, little effort at a smile on it, to reassure him. It was only a hasty glance, for there was so much tenderness and admiration in the pitying look that met hers that involuntarily her eyes sank beneath it ; and she drew herself farther away, taking her hands from the clasp of which before they had been almost unconscious, and flushing timidly. Yet the face at which she had looked was handsome enough to warrant a second glance ; far more beautiful than pretty Sybil Dysart's ever was or would be—one of those faces, indeed, which you oftener see in pictures or marble than in real life, with the short curled hair, and straight, purely-cut features of an early Greek statue ; eyes blue and long and lashed as a woman's, with a woman's power, too, of pathos and tenderness ; and a mouth so absolutely winning in its full, sharply-defined curves, that it was little wonder the words that issued from it seldom failed to work their will with the auditor ; and it almost seemed a pity to shade it under the fringe of soft, brown moustache which overhung the upper lip, and gave a tone of manliness to features which might otherwise have been too effeminate in their delicate, purely-coloured chiselling. Certainly Sybil had never seen so fair a specimen of manhood in all her young life before, among the men she knew, or indeed anywhere, save in a beautiful Roman cameo which her mother had set in a brooch, and about which the girls used to dispute in their earlier days—Sybil calling it St John the Divine, while Jenny persisted that it was only the Apollo.

Truly Jenny was right. There was far more of the Apollo than the saint in him whom the cameo resembled, and were he to be judged by all the harm which even in his short life had been wrought by that beautiful sunlit face of his, all the broken hearts and perjured vows, and blurred or tarnished fames, it might be doubted if even long years of penance and seclusion would have procured for Gareth Vane canonisation by the Sacred College.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT CHADLEIGH END THOUGHT ABOUT IT.

'THANK you for taking so much trouble about me, but I am really not hurt at all, and I was very silly to be so frightened,' Sybil repeated. 'I was trespassing in coming across here at all, or it couldn't have occurred.'

'Then that partly accounts for my carelessness. I have rented Farmer Dyson's shooting for this week, and before starting for the upland fields this afternoon, he mentioned that I should find all the gates padlocked, for he never allowed any right of way across them; so that the last thing I expected to find in the line of my fire was a young lady.'

'I know.' Sybil was still blushing very deeply, and by this time was very anxious to escape. She had no idea of how lovely she was looking just then with that pretty rose-colour in her cheeks, and the tear-drops still glittering on her long eyelashes; but she felt rather than saw the deepening admiration in the gaze still bent on her, and it embarrassed her. 'But I wanted to take a short cut across, and there was a gap in the hedge. I had better go back now.'

'Had you not better wait a little first? I am sure you are not able to walk yet,' the young man suggested. He was as anxious to keep this shy, dainty maiden, whose trembling little hands had felt so soft and tiny in his grasp a moment back, as she was to escape, and inwardly blessed the accident which had brought him to her side; but Sybil had delayed too long already not to feel that she had sinned against her mother's strict canons of propriety.

'Thank you,' she answered, trying to speak with her usual maidenly dignity. 'But I am quite well now, and it is getting late already. I must make haste home. Good evening.'

She gave him a gentle little bow as she spoke and turned to leave him; but Gareth was not used to being put on one side so lightly by one of the fairer sex, and before she knew he was following her, he was at her side again, his hat in his hand, and his handsome face looking handsomer than ever with the breeze stirring the short curly locks about his brow.

'Excuse me,' he said, earnestly, yet with a studious courtesy, not to say reverence of manner, with which it would have

been hard to quarrel. 'I know I am taking a liberty; but you have had a severe shock, and I really do not think you are fit to walk alone so soon afterwards. Will you not allow me to accompany you part of the way at any rate? If you were to faint—'

'Oh, but there is no fear of that,' Sybil answered, smiling. She could not help smiling because he was so kind and handsome, and looked so very sorry and concerned for her; but having done so she became more eager than ever to take to flight. What if he were to persist, and mamma saw her arrive at home with a young man, a strange young man, at her side? The idea was too dreadful! 'I never fainted in my life, and I would rather go home alone—much rather. It is only a little distance. Good evening.' And then she turned away again, and this time so resolutely that Gareth saw she was in earnest, and that it would be ungentlemanly to persist. Yet as he stood there, watching the slender blue figure growing smaller in the distance, a frown came on his brow and he bit his lips, muttering discontentedly to himself,—

She needn't have been in such a hurry to run away; I shouldn't have eaten her! What a sweet little face, though, and a perfect lady! If it wasn't for that I'd go after her even now. Lots of girls would like nothing better; but I fancy she was in earnest, and somehow I shouldn't like to vex her. Dear little thing, how pretty she looked with her eyes full of tears! I wonder if she guessed how much I would have liked to kiss them away!

There was no sign of them when Sybil reached Hillbrow and entered the drawing-room, where her mother and sister were seated; nor did she make any mention of her adventure. Mrs Dysart suffered from a weak heart, which, indeed, was the chief cause of her always being more or less an invalid, and her daughters were always careful not to bring on an attack by any startling or unpleasant tidings. It was therefore a relief to Sybil to be able to explain to them her late appearance by its original cause.

'Poor Granny Smith was worse, mamma. She could hardly swallow the soup you sent her, and there was no one with her, so I really did not like to come away till her daughter came in from the harvest-field. I thought you would not be vexed.'

Mrs Dysart smiled.

'On the contrary, dear, you were quite right; though I was

getting very anxious, for it was such a stormy sunset, and I was afraid you had not an umbrella.'

'But I wish you had come in sooner, Sybil,' cried Jenny eagerly. She had sat down on the floor to unbutton her sister's boots, as the latter, tired with her long walk, threw herself back in an easy-chair. 'For you have missed two events; and there are so few events in every day that it is too bad not to be in the way of them when they come.'

'That depends on whether they were pleasant,' said Sybil. 'What were these?'

'Well, first,' Jenny answered, slowly, and looking up in her sister's face with a half-shy glance, 'first, Lion Ashleigh called.'

Sybil's face grew pink all over in a moment. Hers was one of those colours which come and go very easily, and the process was very becoming to her; but she was exceedingly annoyed at it herself, and resented it at present by sitting upright, and saying, a little sharply, 'Lion Ashleigh! You don't call that an event, do you, Jenny? Why, how often has he called before; and how many millions of times do you think he may call again?'

'Yes; but not this time,' Jenny persisted, in her quaint, grave way; 'and one can never feel sure about the others. They mayn't come at all, you know. Besides, I was sorry, because I could see how disappointed he was at not finding you. He kept looking at the door, and answering mamma all at random, and he would only take one cup of tea; while when you—'

'Jenny, dear,' said Mrs Dysart's soft voice, 'give me my scissors. Thanks. Who is answering at random now? Why, you are chattering so fast you haven't even told Sybil your other event yet.'

It was said in the gentlest tone, but somehow Sybil felt relieved and her sister subdued. The second piece of information did not come with half the zest of the first.

'Adelaide Ashleigh says the Tennis Club has decided to give a ball at Epsom at the close of the playing season; and her mother has been asked to be one of the lady patronesses. It is to be quite a grand affair. Oh dear! I wish I were old enough to go. I suppose you will, if the Ashleighs do!'

'You will be old quite soon enough, my dear,' said Mrs Dysart. 'Even if a dance were worth growing old for, which I can't say I think it is.'

'Oh, mamma!' cried Jenny, turning her head to look at her; she was still sitting on the floor with a boot in her lap, and one of Sybil's slender little feet held caressingly between her hands; 'you don't think I want to dance, do you? I wasn't thinking of myself. I want to go with Sybil, and look at her with all the other people round her. Of course I know she must look nicer than any of them; but I should like to see it, and one needn't be "come out" for that. I don't believe anyone would trouble to notice me.'

'I am not so sure of that,' said Mrs Dysart quietly. 'At any rate we will not try.' And Sybil sprang up with a laugh, thrusting her little feet into the slippers Jenny had brought her.

'Jenny, you are a goose; you think no people can come up to your own family,' she said, gaily. 'Perhaps I sha'n't go at all. How do I know if mamma will let me,' glancing playfully at her mother, 'or even if I shall be invited? You had better be sure of having something to look at before you want to go.' But indeed the younger girl's admiration came as naturally to her sister as having her boots taken off. It was Jenny's way to wait on those she loved, and when the two went up to dress for dinner a few minutes afterwards she busied herself in brushing out Sybil's fair hair and fastening back the folds of her white dress, before she thought of doing anything for herself, while her sister stood gazing dreamily out at the heavy storm-clouds rolling over the sky. Gareth Vane had forgotten the pretty girl in the turnip-field at that moment in the consumption of his dinner, which he ate while perusing a heavily-scented little note which had arrived for him during the day; and Sybil's thoughts were also wandering to someone else, for, after a few minutes, she asked, with a slight blush,—

'If Lady Ashleigh is patroness, of course they will all be there. I wonder if mamma would let me go. It would not be like a private ball, you know.'

'No; they would give it at the King's Head, where they give the hunt and archery balls. Lion said so; and that he always enjoyed going to them before he was ordained. He does go to dances now and then still, doesn't he?'

'Yes; but as he doesn't dance it makes no difference to other people. I almost wonder he does not stay away altogether.'

'Perhaps he likes looking on, as I should. He said once he liked to see you dance—you moved so softly and lightly,'

said Jenny simply ; but Sybil had turned to the window again, and did not seem to hear.

‘Jenny,’ she said, suddenly, ‘I didn’t tell you downstairs for fear of frightening mother, but I had such a start to-day. A man nearly shot me.’

‘Shot—you !’ cried Jenny.

Sybil’s tone had been dreamily conversational rather than otherwise ; but the words brought her sister to her side in a moment, with one hand grasping her nervously by the shoulder.

‘Yes,’ said Sybil, not troubling to look round ; ‘we were on opposite sides of the hedge, and the hare he aimed at ran right across my feet. Oh, it was only a fright—don’t crumple my sleeve, Jen—and I had no business in the field at all, only I didn’t see any of Farmer Dyson’s men about, and I wanted to take a short cut home. It was curious though, only a few minutes before I had been looking at the sky. It was all hot and coppery-looking, and the sun was behind a cloud, and its rays came out like the fingers of a great flaming hand. I almost felt as if it were driving me on against my will somewhere—I don’t know where—and then this happened. But you see it came to nothing, and he did not look— Jenny, child, there’s the dinner-bell, and your hair not done ! Hurry, or you will be late.’

And, as Mrs Dysart was as particular about punctuality as about most other things, Jenny had to hurry in earnest, and the conversation came to an end. But that night after Sybil was in bed a strange dream came to her. She dreamt that she was at a ball—the Tennis Club Ball at the King’s Head—and that Lionel Ashleigh was with her, walking by her side, and looking at her as Jenny said he loved to look. She looked at him too, and to her surprise the face was not Lionel’s, but that beautiful one with the tender dark-blue eyes that had bent so anxiously over hers in the turnip-field ; and while she looked, it became one with her mother’s cameo which she was wearing on her breast, and which appeared in some mysterious way to be endowed with life, and smiling at her.

‘I know it is St John. It is more beautiful than anyone else could be,’ she said to Jenny, and Jenny answered,—

‘No, it is the Apollo. Throw it away ! Throw it away !’ and tried to tear it from her.

The girl woke up quite suddenly and smiled to herself at the foolish dream ; but the cameo-like face was still vivid in her mind, and she wondered vaguely before turning back to

her sleep if it belonged to anyone she should ever meet again. No vision of the fiery hand rose up against her then, and it may be doubted whether she ever again remembered it. Hers was not one of those retentive memories which are apt to dwell even on trifling things, and exaggerate them to their later imagination ; and of all other things portents of evil were the most foreign to the sunny placidness of Sybil Dysart's character. Yet it had been well if this one had dwelt with her and been attended to ; for assuredly, of all crises which come in the lives of men and women, that which marked the meeting between her and Gareth Vane was the most fatal which could ever have happened to her on this side of the grave.

Chadleigh End had revenged itself on Mrs Dysart, of course, for her rejection of its hospitalities. Indeed, the little village would have been so very superior to the rest of the world had that not been the case, that I think the widow ought to have been rather grateful than otherwise, that, in addition to the stock accusations of pride and exclusiveness, she had not been credited with anything worse than aiming at the heir of Dilworth Hall for her eldest girl ; and after that young gentleman's marriage—'escape,' the Chadleigh Endites called it—of pursuing the same scheme with regard to his brother, who was an officer in the navy. They had found out at last 'the reason why she came to settle at Hillbrow.' Of course it was for nothing else but to catch those two Ashleigh boys ; and if John had proved amenable to Sybil's charms, Jenny would have been brought forward for William. How disappointed Mrs Dysart must have been, poor thing ! at the failure of her deep-laid little scheme ! and after keeping those two girls of hers shut up as if they were too precious for any ordinary people to look at, just because she knew how much the Ashleighs thought of family and that sort of thing, and wanted to assume to belong to county folk herself. Poor woman ! Well, it hadn't done her much good, for Lady Ashleigh had been too clever for her after all, as anyone might have known she would be.

I don't think, however, that Mrs Dysart was disappointed ; or that either she or Lady Ashleigh troubled themselves very much about the reports above quoted, even if they ever heard them. Had there been even a shadow of foundation for them it might have been otherwise ; but John was so much older than the Dysart girls, and so early taken with the charms of the Honourable Victoria, that he had not ceased to regard Sybil with the lofty patronage of a young man for a half-grown

girl at the time of his engagement and of that party at which Miss Dysart made her first appearance in society. While William, a much younger lad, first at school and then at sea, was looked on more in the light of a rather troublesome-mischiefous brother than a friend by the Dysart girls—Sybil and Adelaide keeping out of his way and ignoring him ; while Jenny and he maintained a sort of perpetual warfare, showing itself in incessant teasing on his part, and sharp speeches on hers. She said he was 'so stupid ;' and, unless Lionel was there to take her part, would rather stay at home than go to the Hall during Will's holidays ; while he retorted by calling her 'Spitfire,' or 'Miss Priggy Shanks'—an unkind allusion to the length and slenderness of her limbs, which poor Jenny found it impossible to forgive.

It was a different case, however, with Lionel Ashleigh, the Rector's only son. Educated at Rugby, and transplanted thence to Oxford, he had never been quite as much thrown with the girls from Hillbrow as his cousins ; and being one of those bullet-headed, muscular, rough-voiced lads who always look out of place except in the cricket-field or a four-oar, and who combine a strong distaste for the juvenile feminine gender, with an intense loyalty and admiration for 'fellows' of their own sex, he had taken so little notice of his mother's small visitors as to hardly know them apart, and only interfered at times to save Jenny from being over-tortured by his cousin William, from a kind of rough chivalry for things small and weak, enhanced by the pleasure of a fight on any excuse. In this spirit he went to Oxford, where he managed to unite hard reading with athletic exercises in a way which left less leisure than ever for feminine society. Indeed, if he had any choice in that matter, it was for ladies of his mother's and Mrs Dysart's age. He was quite fond, indeed, of the low-voiced, keen-tongued widow, and would sometimes linger for a talk with her when sent with a message from the Rectory, even while the girls' gay voices were ringing from the garden and their bright faces flitting to and fro in the verandah. He was an ardent botanist at this time, a devoted follower of Ruskin, crammed full of impossibly lofty ideas and brilliant mental chimeras ; and Mrs Dysart entered into them all, drew him out, and discussed them even more sympathetically than his mother, who adored him personally, but regarded his pet fancies as a joke, and used to beg him 'not to irritate papa' by producing them at

the Rectory dinner-table, in a way which Lionel did not feel to be intellectually encouraging.

Young men, however, are not cast in adamant, and the period immediately after leaving college is one which not infrequently casts a change over the spirit of their dreams. Lionel had bid good-bye to *Alma Mater*, and was reading for orders with a clerical friend of his father's in the wilds of Yorkshire, when John Ashleigh's engagement and that often-mentioned party in honour of it took place. He came up to Dilworth for the latter, saw Sybil Dysart, fair, sweet, and simple, looking among the other girls like a wood-anemone in a bouquet of gaudy garden-flowers, and straightway fell hopelessly in love with her.

'Don't talk to me of what I said before,' he said to his cousin William when chaffed about his sudden and undisguised surrender. 'I was a boy and a fool then. I am a man now, and she is the only woman I have ever seen. All the rest are dolls and shams.' And when Sybil showed her dance-card to her mother next day it was so scrawled over with 'L. A.'s' that Mrs Dysart could hardly make out any other name, and looked somewhat anxious over it till Sybil explained it to be 'only Lion Ashleigh, but grown so big and different, and—and much nicer. You would hardly know him, mamma.'

Since then he had become their near neighbour, having shortly after his ordination been given the curacy at Chadleigh End; and so few days passed without bringing him to Hill-brow on some errand or another; and so kind was Mrs Dysart in her unvarying welcome for him, that before long the Chadleigh End gossips were again setting their heads together. Some said that the widow, foiled at the Hall, was trying to console herself with the Rectory; others, that she had always had a design on the latter for one of her girls, only that it was to have been the 'cadette' in the original programme; while a few went so far as to say that the young people were regularly engaged. This, however, reached Lionel's ears, and was promptly and indignantly denied. He was even so far affected by the rumour as to decrease his visits at Hill-brow; and as at the same time the De Boonyen family took up his denial, and went about repeating it with somewhat unnecessary energy, a counter-report grew up; to wit, that haughty Mrs Ashleigh and purse-proud Mrs De Boonyen had come to the conclusion that birth might safely be bartered for money, and that Lion was to be made happy with the hand, not of Sybil Dysart, but of one of the flat-faced little damsels at Hapsburg Hall.

CHAPTER IV.

DIPLOMACY.

JENNY felt as if her mother had snubbed her—very gently, perhaps, but still snubbed her intentionally, when she was dis coursing, girl-like, on Lionel Ashleigh's visit ; and she was right. Mrs Dysart would not have owned for the world to caring anything for the vulgar gossip of the neighbourhood, though this time it had succeeded in reaching her ears ; but the young curate's disappointment at only finding two of the family at home, and his eager glances at the door when Jenny told him in all naïveté that Sybil had only gone to see a poor woman and would soon be back, were not lost on the mother any more than was the late falling off in his visits, or Sybil's blush at the mention of his name. Very few things were lost upon this quiet, pale-faced little lady, most of whose time was spent on a couch in the warmest corner of the drawing-room at Hillbrow. It is your silent, low-voiced, unexcitable women, who seem to take little interest in anything or anyone, that managed to see everything and know what everything means, long before those who are most eager in their curiosity have so much as found out a clue to the matter in question ; and she had marked that blush on Sybil's cheek once or twice before and traced it to the same cause. Long after both girls were asleep that night she lay wide awake and thinking, thinking with that furrow of pain on her brow and in her heart of which only parents know the full bitterness, when they begin to open their eyes to the fact that the day for giving up their children's first affections is about to dawn ; and when morning came she wrote a little note, and sent it off by the gardener's son to Dilworth. It only contained these words,—

‘ DEAR FRIEND,—If you are going to be at home and alone this afternoon, send the pony-carriage over for me, and I will come and spend an hour with you. I want a quiet talk about the children.—Yours affectionately, C. DYSART.’

After that she gave her orders and read some Italian and German with Jenny ; also scolded Sybil a little for neglecting her music ; and insisted that she should take two hours' practising that very day.

‘ I gave you the best masters because I hoped to make you competent to teach, if it should ever be needed that you should,’ she said, severely ; ‘ but I might as well have spared.

my money, and the self-sacrifice necessary for having it to spend, if you are to throw away all you have learnt now.' And Sybil, who had the sweetest temper in the world, went up and kissed her, saying, laughingly,—

'Don't be cross, mamma. I have the flowers and chickens to attend to, and a letter to write before lunch; but after that I'll strum away as long as you please. Jenny, you and I will have a good practice, and be "not at home" to the world.'

'The *world* of Chadleigh End!' said Mrs Dysart, with the faintest little compression of her lips; 'I hope you won't disappoint many of its votaries, my dear.' But just then the maid came in with the answer to her note, and glancing over it, Mrs Dysart added, pleasantly,—

'Mrs Ashleigh wants me to go over to the Rectory for an hour this afternoon. She will send the pony-carriage for me, and desires her love to both of you. I think I shall go.'

'Shall you, mamma?' said Sybil, in some surprise. Usually it took a good deal longer for Mrs Dysart to make up her mind to the exertion of a drive even to Dilworth. 'Then I suppose you will want me too?'

'Well—no,' said Mrs Dysart, looking at the note again. 'Our kind friend seems not very well, and says nothing about you coming. Besides, if you really are going to have an afternoon's practising— But you may come and help me dress, dear child. I can't do without you there.'

And then the mother suddenly put off her brief acerbity and drew the pretty face down to her for a kiss so tender and yearning that Sybil half wondered if anything was troubling her, and whether there really was any possibility that they, so daintily nurtured and guarded, might have to teach music for their living in after days. In her heart she thought it utterly out of the question—yes, even if the worst came to the worst, and they were left orphaned and penniless. Other people might have to work, but not she, while there was a strong arm to defend and a strong hand to labour for her; and of course Jenny would be taken care of too as her sister. No one who loved the one sister would suffer the other to want for anything; and with the thought of such love, a little, dimpling smile came to the corners of her mouth; though I do not think that she gave the lover any name even then in her own heart. Whoever he was he might be relied on to do that much, she said to herself, with a backward toss of her graceful little head, so mother need not trouble about their future; and indeed Mrs

Dysart herself seemed to think she had been unnecessarily sharp in the matter. She had never been kinder to her daughters than she was for the rest of the morning. It was someone else who had reason to think her the reverse of good-natured before she reached Dilworth.

The young curate, Lionel Ashleigh, had just reached the brow of the hill as Mrs Dysart came out of her gate in order to get into his mother's pony-carriage which was drawn up outside. He sprang forward, of course, to help her in, and they shook hands cordially as he said,—

‘So you are going to the Rectory. I recognised madam's clothes-basket and pony from the bottom of the hill and wondered if she were within. I was just coming to call myself.’

‘Were you? Now I am sorry,’ said Mrs Dysart gently. ‘If it was about anything in particular—but I suppose that could hardly be as we saw you only yesterday. However, get in too, and let us drive slowly. I don't like to keep your mother's pony standing; but we can talk as we go along. Was it anything about your poor people?’

‘Oh dear, no!’ Lion cried, with a slight flush on his face, and drawing back a step as if to show he did not want to detain her. ‘I was only looking in to inquire—I'm afraid Miss Dysart got home dreadfully late yesterday. I heard afterwards that she had stayed with old Mrs Smith all the afternoon. It was awfully good of her. I hope she wasn't very tired.’

‘Not at all,’ said Mrs Dysart quietly. ‘She often sits all the afternoon with me, you know, when I am ill; and a little usefulness is good for girls. Well, Lion, as you don't want me, then—’

‘Oh no,’ he broke in quickly. ‘Don't think of delaying for me. You go out so seldom, and I can always have a talk with you at home.’

‘Yes,’ the widow said, smiling, ‘we see each other pretty often, don't we? So I won't be polite and say “Come in” to-day. I know your mother doesn't like the pony being kept waiting. Have you any special message for her?’

‘I? Thanks, no,’ he answered, his face falling perceptibly. ‘Then—then the young ladies are not at home either?’

‘Oh yes, they are at home in one sense,’ said Mrs Dysart pleasantly; ‘but they told me they should deny themselves to all visitors, as they had set their hearts on a good afternoon's practising; so you needn't feel yourself expected to ask for them. Good-bye.’

And then she really did drive away ; and Lionel had nothing for it but to walk down the hill again. I daresay his parish work profited by it ; but certainly he did not think Mrs Dysart in one of her kindest moods. ‘ An afternoon’s practising ! ’ As if that were such an important thing it must prevent the girls from seeing him ! And he had not seen Sybil yesterday ; or indeed since last Sunday. She must care a great deal for her music if she could not spare half-an-hour from it.

A very big carriage drawn by very big horses had just reached the foot of the hill at the same time as himself ; and three ladies with a great show of plumpy bonnets and pale-silk parasols leant forward to bow to him. The eldest of the party followed her bow by beckoning to him ; so Lionel had to smooth his brow and go up to shake hands. It was not done very willingly.

‘ How do you do ? You are quite a stranger, Mr Ashleigh,’ Mrs De Boonyen said, in her most affable manner. ‘ I saw your mother yesterday, and told her so. *Quite* a stranger. Why, it must be three or four weeks since you have been at Hapsburg.’

‘ You forget all I have to do, and with an absent rector too,’ Lionel answered, smiling. ‘ I have very little time for visiting.’ But he felt rather a humbug when he said it, remembering how cross he had just been at having been debarred from a visit ; and the eldest Miss De Boonyen seemed to know what was in his thoughts.

‘ Are you so hard-worked ? ’ she said. ‘ I thought there was not much for a clergyman to do at Chadleigh ; and then you get a good deal of help, don’t you ? Miss Dysart—we saw you coming away from there just now—she does not seem to go out much in society ; but I hear she is quite—quite devoted to your parishioners.’

Lionel felt rather uncomfortable and more than rather angry. ‘ What the deuce did the girl mean ? ’ he said to himself with unclerical fervour ; but Miss De Boonyen’s snub nose and pale eyes looked so innocent of any meaning whatever when he looked at her, that he felt inclined to laugh at his own touchiness ; and before he could answer, the second Miss De Boonyen put in hurriedly,—

‘ Miss Dysart looks as if she could be devoted to anything good, Mary Jane, she has such a sweet face. Mamma, don’t you think Miss Dysart looks very sweet ? ’

Horatia Maude De Boonyen was if anything shorter and plainer than her elder sister. One of her eyes had a slight

cast in it, and chronic indigestion from living on over-rich food had given a puffed, unwholesome pallor to her face. Also when she got nervous or excited she flushed all over a dull-red colour; and being somewhat taken aback at her own temerity, she was suffused with that tint now; yet Lionel, looking up at her, found the glow not unbecoming, and for the first time thought her a shade removed from absolute repulsiveness.

'If she weren't so ugly—and I don't think she is quite so hideous as her sister—there might be something nice about that girl,' he said to himself when he had at last got free, after having been worried into a promise to dine at Hapsburg Hall on the next day but one.

Mrs Dysart in the meantime was being driven to Dilworth, and having arrived at the Rectory was shown without delay into a pretty, comfortable, untidy drawing-room, where the Rector's wife, tall and portly of person and stately of mien, rose up from an arm-chair in the bay-window, and throwing down a little heap of account books, took her by both hands and greeted her very cordially.

'So good of you to come over to me this way,' she said, pulling forward a low chair near her. 'Sit down there now and be comfortable. I have nothing to do to-day, and it's quite a comfort to see anyone who isn't either just having, or just had, a new baby. The fuss they are making at the Hall over this first arrival of Victoria's is too absurd. Margaret is crazy about it, of course, being her first grandchild; and even John, who is unassuming enough generally, looks as if he had done something wonderfully virtuous, and deserving of an Albert Memorial at the very least, in becoming a parent; while as for Sir William—my dear, he fairly bores me to death every time I see him. There's a new kind of feeding-bottle with a swivel-neck—do you know it? something which will put the milk down the infant's throat even if he's standing on his head with his mouth shut, and— But there, Sir William will tell you all about it. He could talk of nothing else yesterday. I hope you take an interest in feeding-bottles, Clara?'

'Well, it is so long since I have had to do with things of that sort,' said Mrs Dysart, with a smile in which a keen observer might have detected some latent nervousness. She added, with a little sigh, 'One has other troubles with one's children after feeding-bottle days are over which drive the latter out of one's mind.'

'Ah yes, of course. Not that I've ever troubled very much about mine at any time,' Mrs Ashleigh answered, so carelessly that if Mrs Dysart had intended her remark to lead to any question about present troubles she must have been disappointed. 'Victoria and her mother-in-law are making a nice peck of worries for themselves over this little atom. However, they seem to enjoy it, and, after all, if a swivel-necked bottle does answer better than— My dear, are you sure you are out of the draught there? I am going to ring for some tea.'

'Quite,' said Mrs Dysart, rather shortly. She was a small, pale, delicate-featured woman, with a skin which had once been as transparently fair as her daughter's, and light-brown hair banded smoothly under her widow's cap; but just now there was an almost bluish tinge in the pallor of her face; and her small, frail-looking hands were clasped together over her crape skirt with a kind of nervous quiver.

'Don't ring for tea on my account,' she added. 'I never take it of an afternoon. No, I don't think Lionel has given you much trouble. I hope he never will.'

'Then you hope more than I do,' retorted her friend. 'A young man who never gave his mother any trouble would be a miracle—or a monster, and I don't think Lion is either.'

'He is a very good fellow, which is better; and very popular in Chadleigh,' said Mrs Dysart warmly. Mrs Ashleigh only laughed, however.

'The Ashleigh men are all good fellows and all popular. Lion may do well enough for Chadleigh End if he's only that; but—'

'You are more ambitious for him?' said Mrs Dysart, with an involuntary quiver about the lips. 'Well, I suppose that is not to be wondered at.'

'Ambitious? Not I, or I wouldn't have let him go into the Church at all, where decidedly there isn't much to be done now-a-days; and as to what it will be when the Radicals get disestablishment— But don't tell the Rector I said that, or he would have a bonfire made in the home-meadow, and offer me up on it as an *auto-da-fé* in the cause of Church and State. Ah! well, I daresay both will last his time.'

'And Lionel's too, I hope,' said the widow.

'Oh, I believe he would be rather glad if they did not. He has fads, which was a reason for my not having wished him to come here as curate to his father. Lion is too new-fangled for the Rector. But there! you are making me as bad as my

niece Victoria or Sir William himself; and, after all, you ought to know more of the boy's ideas than I do, now that you "sit under" him.'

'I don't often get as far as church, however,' said Mrs Dysart.

'No; but by his showing you see more of him than do most of his church-going parishioners,' retorted her friend, pausing in the act of pouring out tea, to look the widow keenly in the eyes for one second. Mrs Dysart returned the look with calmness. It seemed to do her good.

'Yes,' she said, quietly; 'if he were to see all his friends as often as he does us, I should not think there was much to be done in the parish. Not but what he is always very welcome.'

'Don't let him bore you, however,' said Mrs Ashleigh, looking away again to add another lump of sugar to her tea. 'John bores me dreadfully at times. Why are eldest sons invariably the dullest of the family? I often feel inclined to say, "Go away, do," when he comes in here for a duty call, and stays an hour or more prosing.'

'I believe I said that to Lionel to-day, though not because he bores me,' replied the widow. 'He was just coming up to call on us as I was starting for here, but I didn't like to keep the pony standing, and I knew the girls wanted a quiet afternoon for their music, so I was inhospitable and sent him away.'

'At which I daresay he was very cross,' said Mrs Ashleigh, laughing. 'I am glad to hear, though, the girls are so devoted to their music. I'm afraid I usedn't to be as much so in my young days.'

'I don't think they are in general; but I was speaking to them about it rather seriously this morning. It was a thing their dear father laid great stress on; and if Sybil were to go to Lord Dysart's—'

'But I thought you told me you never meant to let her go there, that they were a very fast set altogether, and his sister, Lady—what's her name?—the one who does the honours—just the sort of woman you and I most dislike.'

'So I did; but he has written about it twice; and with my weak health, you must acknowledge, Rose,' Mrs Dysart's tone became suddenly plaintive here, 'that I can't help feeling anxious about my children's future when I think that I may be called on to leave them before they are settled in life, and it does not seem wise to throw away friends.'

'I don't think you need worry yourself on that score,' said

Mrs Ashleigh cheerfully. There seemed something unkind in the persistent cheerfulness of the Rector's wife to-day, or Mrs Dysart thought so. 'Pretty, ladylike girls will always make friends anywhere; and I hope you will be spared to them for many a long day yet. I see what it is though, Clara,' she added, in a jesting tone; 'you are beginning to repent of having snubbed those dear De Boonyens so unmercifully; and indeed I think you have cause—'

'The corn-plaster people!' cried Mrs Dysart, with that sudden compression of lip and erectness of head which Chaddleigh people found so obnoxious in her. 'Thank you. I don't think I should seek friends for my girls there! Not but—' with a sudden glance at her hostess, and a markedly apologetic change of tone—'that I am sure they are very nice, worthy people in their way; very much so, of course.'

Mrs Ashleigh nodded more cheerfully than ever. 'I call them dear creatures,' she answered. 'Corn-plaster people! My dear soul, you haven't imbibed Lion's Radical ideas, or you wouldn't say that. There are very few ills in life that plasters when made of gold won't heal; and there really is no humbug about that balm. My maid swears by it; and would like, I believe, to drop a grateful curtsey to young De Boonyen every time he comes here. Do you know he will have nine or ten thousand a-year? Why, any girl would be glad to have him. My dear Clara, you are too proud in these matters. I daresay you would find him a charming fellow if you only knew him.'

'Possibly. I do not know, however, that I care to do so at present,' said Mrs Dysart coldly. She added, with the anxious look a little more defined in her eyes, 'They are friends of yours though. I had forgotten that. You see a good deal of them, don't you?'

'Yes; they are very kind in calling here; and, upon my word, I don't altogether dislike the second girl. She's a modest, humble, little thing, and might be good for something if anyone would take the trouble to give her a little training.'

'And are you thinking of doing so, Rose?' Mrs Dysart asked, with almost too great an appearance of carelessness as she began to button on her gloves. Her face was paler now than when she first came in. Her friend opened her eyes.

'Well, not exactly. I don't know, for one thing, that she would care to let me; though she looks docile enough, poor thing! and I own I do like to have a girl about me. That re-

minds me that I have been going to ask you to spare Sybil to me for a little. It is a long while since she has been here; and'—with a slight smile—'I would keep her closely to her—music.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Dysart quietly. She was standing up now and ready to go. 'I daresay Sybil would like it very much if I could manage it; but she has been looking rather pale of late; and when Lord Dysart last wrote—'

'Oh, if you are thinking of sending her to Lord Dysart's, don't let me stand in the way,' Mrs Ashleigh put in quickly. 'I daresay it will be much better for her.'

Mrs Dysart looked at her rather earnestly.

'I don't,' she said, in a very gentle voice, 'not if you really want her. Do you, Rose?'

'I shouldn't ask her if I did not. Didn't I tell you that I wanted a girl about me?'

'Yes; but you spoke of Miss De Boonyen, and there might be reasons—I would really prefer that you asked her now.'

'And I would really prefer the contrary. Besides, if I did, Lion would never come near me all the time she was here; and would bore you more than ever.'

'My dear Rose! I never said Lion bored me.'

'No; but he must have been rather a frequent visitor, or you wouldn't have had to send him away to-day; and in charity to you I would like to find an attraction to bring him here instead. Ah yes, I know I spoil him; but that's a way with mothers, I fear. Then you will let Sybil come to me before long?'

She said this after a pause, as if it had nothing to do with the rest of the sentence; and with her hand in her friend's by way of farewell. Something in the latter's small, pale face and feverish eyes, however, touched her; and the next minute she bent her head, exclaiming, as they kissed one another,—

'Clara, you make difficulties for yourself by over-anxiety. You always did. Haven't I often said that I envied you your two girls when I have none of my own, and that I should like to steal Sybil and make a daughter of her? And you're not going to pretend that she isn't fond of us.'

'No; for I am very sure that she is,' said Mrs Dysart gravely. 'But if it should be a mistake to encourage it now; if you should have wishes which—'

'It will not be a mistake; and I have no wishes. Let Sybil alone, and don't spoil her by sending her to Lord Dysart's to be turned into a fast young woman of the period with a Skye

terrier's fringe and a waterman's jersey. I should be expecting next to hear of her photograph in the London shops taken sprawling in a hammock or making eyes over a muff.'

'You need not be afraid. There is nothing of the fashionable beauty in my little Sybil. Good-bye, Rose, and—don't laugh at me for being anxious about my children. They are all I have left, remember, and they are so much to me.'

'And what do you suppose mine is to me, who have only one?' Mrs Ashleigh put in, with sudden heat. 'But I fancied we had both seen plainly enough how things were going, and I had come to the conclusion not to interfere, more especially as it would most likely be no good if we did.'

'If you are content, I am, most certainly,' said Mrs Dysart quickly; and then she pressed her friend's hand and went away with something very like tears in her cold, grey eyes, and a softened look about the mouth. Mrs Ashleigh stood looking after her.

'What an odd woman Clara is!' she thought to herself. 'But she was always the same as a girl! When she had set her heart on anything, no matter how straightforward or trifling, she never minded how much planning and contriving she devoted to getting at it indirectly, instead of going up and asking for it like other girls. As if I was blind! But I suppose she has heard the rumour that those people are setting their caps at Lion, and got nervous lest I should approve of it. Poor, dear soul! I wonder if she got things out of her husband in the same way. I'm glad Sybil takes after him. I don't think Lion would like a too clever wife. He is downright enough, dear old boy! Well, I suppose Clara's mind is easier now.'

And indeed, when Mrs Dysart got home, she told the girls she had had a very pleasant drive and chat with her old friend, and felt all the better for it.

'And no one called the whole afternoon; so we weren't required to say "Not at home" once, mamma,' said Jenny. 'You were right in your joke about it, but it was rather disappointing to Sybil.'

'Poor Sybil! Was it? Let us hope someone will console her by calling to-morrow, since she is so fond of visitors,' said Mrs Dysart, stroking back Sybil's hair with a slow, loving touch. She made no mention, however, either then or afterwards, of having sent one visitor away; and the girls never suspected it.

CHAPTER V.

LION ASHLEIGH.

IT was not for some time, however, that Lionel called again at Hillbrow. The very decided way in which its mistress had given him his *congé* that morning, and the poor excuse about the girls' music, had stung his vanity, of which he had not much, and wounded his feelings into the bargain. The awkward, gruff-voiced, bullet-headed lad had grown into a big, broad-shouldered fellow; not much over middle height, perhaps, but strong as a lion; with a brown head, a square jaw, and sunburnt face, throat and arms white as milk, and muscled like a gladiator; a wide, resolute, good-tempered mouth; and a pair of eyes of no particular colour, but true and straightforward enough to look down the lie in another which he was incapable of uttering for himself. Most people liked Lionel Ashleigh; and indeed he deserved it, being an honest, manly young fellow, rather hot-headed and obstinate, perhaps, with Liberal politics, which annoyed his family's Conservatism, and a tendency to 'broadness' of doctrine which would have annoyed his Rector, an Evangelical of the old school, if the old gentleman had been aware of it, instead of choosing to absent himself and spend a *dilettante* invalid life between Nice and Venice, leaving the care of his parish to a young man who did twice as much work as himself, even in his most energetic days, and for less than half the pay. But behind these more external qualities, the curate had a kind heart, and somewhat quicker and more sensitive feelings than people were apt to guess; and in thinking over his dismissal, it occurred to him that on his last two or three visits, Mrs Dysart had not shown herself quite as cordial as she had formerly been. He might not have noticed it if her usual manner to him had not been so much more gentle and affectionate than it was to any other save her own children; but this being so, it made the change more apparent, and he could not help connecting it with that impudent report which had brought Sybil's name into conjunction with his.

Could Mrs Dysart have heard it too?

He had denied it promptly and decisively, feeling that its existence, while there was no truth in it, was both an insult and an injury to the young lady affected by it; and then had

stayed away from the house for some little time, partly from shamefacedness lest the talk should have reached the ears of the inmates there, and partly to prove to the people who set it about that there was no ground for their over-hasty gossip. But perhaps the Dysarts were not aware of that, and held him accountable for its ever having arisen ; or, believing in his innocence, they wished, nevertheless, to show him that if he had any pretensions to the post awarded to him, they would not be sanctioned at headquarters.

If that were so, Lionel said to himself that he was being very hardly treated. Why, he had never made any concealment of his feelings towards Sybil. Ever since that ball at Dilworth Hall she had been the prettiest and nicest of all created girls in his eyes ; and now that he was curate of the parish in which she lived, and could see her constantly, he felt his love for her increase day by day ; and only held himself from speaking it, for fear lest he should injure his own cause by precipitance, and perhaps cause a coolness which might spoil the present harmony and pleasantness of their relations to one another. He was not exactly afraid of her refusing him outright. Something in her eyes, in the colour of her cheek, and the touch of her hand, kept him from that ; but it's an old tale, that true love is humble : and Lion Ashleigh would have risked many things rather than utter a word which might chill the sweetness of Sybil Dysart's smile, and of that playful cordiality which had often seemed an earnest to him of all he most hoped for.

Was he to lose them now, just when he had decided that the time was come for putting the question which was to bring his fate to an issue ?

He was only a curate after all, but a curate with a prospect of one living, the incumbent of which was a gouty old man of seventy, and of Dilworth in the future. Even at present he had two hundred a-year, and the use of the vicarage from the Rector of Chadleigh ; his father allowed him two hundred more, and would most likely increase the allowance when he married ; and he was nephew to one of the oldest and wealthiest baronets in the county. It must be owned that there are not a great many curates for whom one could say so much on the score of eligibility.

But then, as Lionel said to himself with a groan, there were not many girls like Sybil ; and the very care with which she had been kept guarded from the rude eye and touch of the

world, showed that her mother considered her as too precious a pearl by far to be lightly bestowed on the first asker. Lionel was quite ready to endorse that opinion, and hitherto had quite approved of the guarding; but then he had never thought of it as applying to himself; and now, when Mrs Dysart's sudden coldness made that idea seem possible, he felt sorely injured and indignant, and told himself, with some heat, that he had not been treated fairly. Why had she always encouraged him before, and made him welcome almost as his own mother might have done, if she was going to change now? She must have seen that he cared for Sybil. What else would he go there so often for? It is plain that at this moment Lion had forgotten those early days when he considered 'rational conversation' with women of a certain age far preferable to nonsense with any mere girl, however nice and pretty, and greatly preferred Mrs Dysart to her daughter.

And why was she going over to his mother's that day? Were the two putting their heads together to separate him and Sybil? If it was so, and his own mother was going to take part against him, he should think it was a 'most foul and unnatural' proceeding, and they should both know that he did. All of which was of course perfectly wrong and unjust; the falsely-suspected ladies in question having none but the most benevolent intentions towards him, and being far more disposed (Mrs Dysart especially) to further than to hinder him in his matrimonial desires.

There is no creature, however, on this earth so painfully thin-skinned and prone to make difficulties for himself as a lover; and thanks to Mrs Dysart's over-cautious way of going to work, poor Lion fumed and fretted, kept himself proudly away from Hillbrow and Dilworth alike, and would have liked in his sense of ill-usage to forswear society altogether but for the promise he had given to dine at Hapsburg Hall.

He did go there, however, and was rewarded by sipping champagne at fifteen shillings a-bottle, and stuffing himself on grapes as big as ordinary apricots; and after dinner Horatia Maude sang to him in a poor little flat-chested voice, which was only preferable to her brother's anecdotes over the wine, inasmuch as it was not coarse or offensive.

'Only a face at the wee—e—eendow!' quavered poor Horatia, while Lion turned over the pages, and looking down on her tow-coloured head, with its straight scanty fringe of hair on the forehead and broad pink parting, pinker than ever with the exertion

of singing, thought of that graceful flower-like head at Hillbrow behind which he had been so fond of taking up a position. He was very kind to Horatia, however, and thanked her for her song (which made the parting redder than before), bringing her cup of tea to the piano, and talking pleasantly to her while she drank it: all of which was simply in remembrance of that word she had spoken of Sybil last time he saw her. Then the big clock in the hall chimed ten, and Lion said good-bye and made his escape; but after he was gone, Mrs De Boonyen, who was usually rather severe on Horatia Maude, called the girl to her and patted her on the shoulder, telling her approvingly that she had sung very nicely—at any rate (with a meaning smile) young Mr Ashleigh evidently thought so!

‘Is Horry setting her cap at the curate?’ said Albert Edward, with a loud laugh; and poor Horatia grew crimson and cried out piteously that she was not. She became quite miserable a few moments later when her mother said something as to the probability of Mrs Ashleigh inviting her to stay at Dilworth Rectory for a while; and inwardly prayed that nothing of the sort might happen. If Lion had been one of the curates at Epsom, indeed—a big carotty-haired widower of forty, with something like twopence-halfpenny a-year, five children, and his collars and cuffs as frayed at the edges as a Japanese chrysanthemum, it would have been very different. Gladly would she have gone to stay with his mother, an old woman with a mangy front and a six-roomed house somewhere in Holloway, and would have put away her music for ever, if, instead, she might have learnt to darn the five children’s socks and mend those frayed collars: but that was a sorrowful little secret hidden away in her own unobtrusive bosom, and not so much as suspected by the family who were already disposing of her in their imaginations.

‘Jenny,’ said Sybil, ‘you are not like Dorothea after all. She could be comfortably idle sometimes, and you can’t.’

It was one of those golden afternoons in September when it seems impossible to stay indoors, and the Dysart girls were taking advantage of it for a country ramble—a thing they were fond of doing while the long fine days and warm weather lasted. Already, however, the sunnier was drawing to a close, and the yellow corn had been bound into sheaves and piled on huge wains, whose ponderous wheels creaked along the narrow lanes, leaving deep ruts behind them in their wake. Already the

woody night-shade was hanging out clusters of berries, scarlet, green and black. The haws were blushing with their reddiest hue ; and the big white trumpet-shaped convolvulus was binding in its spiral arms and pale-green foliage the hedges where a while back the honeysuckle and wild rose had waved their perfumed clusters. Autumn, with a veil of mist upon her brow and falling leaves beneath her feet, was coming on apace ; and Nature, ever generous in her gracious compensations, laid warmer colours upon Earth's fair bosom as she saw the hot and fickle kisses of the summer sun turning from it to southern climes. Earth should not be left desolate if Mother Nature could help her child ; and so she put forth her hand, and lo ! in tangled hedgerows and bosky woods the alders were swiftly changed to empurpled red, and the maples to ruddy gold ; the blackberry bushes hung out rich clusters of crimson fruit, growing darker day by day ; the sycamore, 'in scarlet honours bright,' rose in a blaze of glory against the metallic lustre of the copper beech ; and down in quiet nooks the wild-strawberry leaves dying off upon the ground made a brilliant broidery of garnets upon the dry ivy-tangled soil. It was to one of these last-named places that the girls had wandered ; a sunny corner of a little wood from which the timber had been partially cleared, the fallen trunks still lying where they had been cut down among a wilderness of young green saplings, trailing blackberry shoots, and tall feathery grass waving its silver plumes gently in the light breeze. Sybil was a little tired with her walk, and sat down to rest on a log covered with grey crumpled lichens like an old man's beard, letting 'Middlemarch,' which she was carrying, slide through her slender fingers on to the ground, while Jenny seated herself on the grass at a little distance, opened a much-worn tin paint-box, and began to sketch vigorously.

There was a quantity of latent energy in Jenny Dysart which never suffered her to be idle for long. Even at times when she seemed to be doing nothing, her head was hard at work ; but generally her fingers were busy as well. Languor or listlessness were things unknown to her, and you could read as much in the bright intentness of her large grey eyes, and the quick, firm movements of her long fingers—that is, if you took any interest in reading her at all ; she being by no means as pretty or fascinating to contemplate as her elder sister. Viewed from a little distance, as they came along the road or sat at work together, the girls looked as alike as they well could be ; but though Jenny's hair was of the same pale soft colour as Sybil's, it lacked

the tinge of gold which made the latter's glitter in the sunlight, and was straight and fine as spun silk without one of those little waves or curls which made a baby halo round Sybil's brow. Her skin, too, had the same pearly fairness as her sister's ; but it was a fairness untinged by that delicate rose-colour in the cheek and finger-tips which lent so much beauty to the elder ; and though her eyes had a certain depth and earnestness which the latter's lacked, they were purely grey, without any of that blue liquid light which made Lion Ashleigh think of wet March violets while gazing into Miss Dysart's eyes. She was very slim also ; slim with an unformed slenderness ; and this, with her dark eyes and the delicacy of her hands and feet, reminded one of the slender-limbed large-eyed fawns in Chadleigh Park ; only you could less easily imagine her than Sybil growing into the round unthinking complacency of the mother doe. She looked up now at her sister with a smile.

'Why, Sybil, what an idea ! As if I or any other girl could be like Dorothea ! Why, if I knew of such a one I should want to go and sit at her feet and worship her. I was thinking only to-day if it were better for the rest of the world to be such a woman in reality, or to be able to invent her in a book.'

'Well, but that's what I call being like her. She was full of odd fancies, and so are you.'

'Only mine are not original. That idea is just a rendering of two of George Elliot's own lines—

"To live worthy the writing, or to write
Worthy the living and the world's delight."

I think, for myself, I'd rather do the latter. It is so difficult for a woman to "live worthy the writing."

'But I don't think men do either, Jenny.'

'More men than women ; and there are others who might. Lion Ashleigh, for instance. One feels with him that it's all there, if the need came to show it—at least, I mean I—used to feel so.'

Jenny had been speaking impetuously, but checked herself suddenly, and the last words came with a kind of jerky embarrassment. Sybil looked at her, colouring a little.

'Is it not a long time since he came to see us ? He had got into the habit of dropping in so often,' she said gently. Then, as her sister did not answer, 'You have not quarrelled in earnest with him, have you, Jenny ? You always are quarrelling over things, you know.'

'Arguing—not quarrelling,' corrected Jenny. 'Lion wouldn't condescend to quarrel with a girl like me.'

'He doesn't condescend to argue with me,' said her sister, laughing. 'I suppose I am not clever enough.'

But Jenny stopped her indignantly.

'Sybil, you know it's not that. You know he always agrees with you. Oh dear, I *did* think—'

'What, dear?' asked Sybil placidly.

'Nothing—at least, I mean—Well, it's no use trying to keep it to myself,' cried Jenny, making a vehement dash with her paint-brush at the sky which she was just putting in, 'I did not think he would have gone and married one of those Miss De Boonyens.'

'Married—who?' asked Sybil. She was not conscious that her voice had changed; she was not even conscious of any particular feeling which need make it do so; but Jenny fancied that it had, and answered in eager remorseful haste,—

'Horatia De Boonyen. But, Sybil, I did not mean that he was married yet. Of course not. Only Emily was talking about it when she was mending my dress this morning'—Emily was the housemaid at Hillbrow—'and I was so shocked I could not help telling mamma. Emily said it was quite fixed; and, do you know, mamma did not seem a bit surprised! She was vexed with me for letting Emily speak to me about such things; but she said Mrs Ashleigh liked Horatia De Boonyen, and that it would be a very good match. Oh dear! I am disappointed in them.'

'My dear Jenny—why?' cried Sybil, laughing. 'How excited you are! Poor little Miss De Boonyen! I think it would do her good to be married, she always looked so frightened; and Mr Beale, of Epsom, said once she was a really nice, good girl.'

'Good enough for him, I daresay!' cried Jenny hotly. Mr Beale was that curate with the red hair and frayed collars of whom I have already spoken, and the second Miss Dysart had not the same opinion of him as the second Miss De Boonyen. 'But not for Lion or his mother—and she who is so proud! I shouldn't have been so surprised at Lady Ashleigh, who is so good-natured she always tries to think everyone is nice.'

'I like Lady Ashleigh the best,' said Sybil. 'It is pleasant being with people who always think you nice. Come, Jenny, don't be ridiculous; surely Lion Ashleigh is the best judge of

who is suited to him. All I wonder is that he has not told us. Adelaide told me of John's engagement long before it was formally announced ; and as for her own, I heard all its preliminaries as soon as they arose. But I daresay he has been too much occupied since it was arranged to come to us. Indeed, now we know what has kept him away, Jenny, I think—'

Sybil did not say what she thought ; for at that moment there was a crackling among the nut-trees and underwood behind them ; and turning their heads they saw Lion Ashleigh himself coming to meet them.

It almost seems at times as if the gods had a spite against us, and interfered out of *malice prepense* to force our best laid plans to 'gang agley.' Perhaps there is a split among them up aloft. Venus has been flirting with Apollo ; and Vulcan has waxed wroth and scolded his wife and son till the outraged Queen of Love is moved in despite to wreak her vexation on human things below ; or it is dull on 'high Olympus'—Mercury has the toothache and Mars a cold, and little Eros, tired of being snubbed by his mother for upsetting the gruel-pot, and thundered at by Jove for blundering over the messages of the winged-footed one, goes off into a corner in the sulks, and revenges himself by shooting a lot of arrows at random, poisoned with all sorts of doubts, errors and misunderstandings for the plaguing of us unhappy mortals here below.

Lionel had risen early on this day with his mind even fuller of Sybil than usual. The weeks that had passed without seeing her had only made her image more present to him, and showed him how strong a hold she had taken of his life. When he came down in the morning he tried to fancy how her bright face would look at the head of the breakfast-table, and what a different aspect the formal comfortless drawing-room would present if consecrated by her presence, and made bright with feminine prettinesses, like the rooms at Dilworth and Hillbrow. Even his study would, he thought, be much improved if he could see Sybil's low chair near his, or her pretty head peeping in at the door. It was a comfortable room enough already, as far as men's ideas of comfort go, with a great luxurious chair for himself, well-filled bookcases ; two or three photographs from the old masters on the walls, a fox's brush, a pair of sculls silver-mounted, and a bat (prizes) over the mantel-shelf ; a host of pipes, whips and walking-sticks filling racks and corners : and sofa, floor and tables

strewn with books, papers, dried plants, fossils from Oyster Hill and the Epsom gravel-pits, and 'rubbish' of all sorts : a room which no woman could have seen without longing to invade it with broom and dustpan and set it to rights ; but which, in its present condition, was just what a man delights in. Unfortunately, Lion wanted the woman as well, and would have even put up with the broom and dustpan for the sake of having her.

'At least I may as well know my fate,' he said to himself that morning at breakfast. 'It is cowardly to shirk it ; and I may have been too touchy. Her mother might not have meant anything. At any rate, if there is a possibility of that rumour having reached Sybil, I owe it to her to let her know that the one desire of my heart is to make it true, and to give her the option of accepting or refusing me. Please God it won't be the latter ! I'll go to her mother this very day.'

With that intention in his mind he started out to get through his parish work as early as possible, and was coming back through Hodnet Wood from some outlying cottages, when, through an opening in the boughs, he saw a bright spot of colour ; and realised, with a sudden leap of every drop of blood in his veins, that it was Sybil herself, not a dozen yards from him ! He did not see Jenny at first. Sybil seemed to be alone, her fair face shining out against a background of light flickering green ; and as he held his breath to gaze upon it all his decorous and proper intentions as to going to Mrs Dysart first fled away before a passionate desire to tell her how he loved her, and learn from herself if she could care for him. The words were trembling on his lips as he broke through the thicket ; but they died there unspoken, for in the same moment he saw Jenny sitting on the grass at her sister's feet, and checked himself just in time.

It was just then that the girls looked up and saw him ; and I suppose the embarrassment in his manner, natural after being so suddenly thwarted in his purpose, added to the fact that they had only that moment been talking of him, communicated a certain constraint to them ; for the three certainly met with a degree of reserve and formality for which each blamed the other, and which made them all very uncomfortable. They shook hands, of course, and made mutual inquiries after respective parents, and then something was said about the weather and Jenny's sketch ; but that young lady wore the expression of an offended antelope, and her

answers were so short that a man must have been dense indeed not to see that he was out of favour with her ; while neither said anything about his late unwonted absence—they, lest the remark should seem to provoke an explanation of the hitherto unannounced engagement, and he from shyness at alluding to a thing about which they seemed quite indifferent. It was one of those stupid little misunderstandings which every now and then spring up between the best of friends, yet which a word could break down if it were only possible to speak it.

It did not seem easy to do so at present.

Sybil behaved the best. She always did. There was a sort of sweet, sunshiny graciousness about her which it took a great deal to ruffle ; and Jenny, looking at her with great, worshipping eyes, thought her manne rto-day simply angelic, and wondered how any man could be in her presence and yet care for another woman. That Lionel, her hero always, and best friend and mentor in general, should be able to do so was a real shock to her, and one by which he fell so suddenly low in her estimation, that when he made some good-natured comment on a faulty bit in her sketch, she coloured high and looked at him as if he had taken an unwarrantable liberty. Lionel coloured too, as much with surprise as annoyance, and drew back on the instant.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said quickly. ‘It was cool of me to make the remark ; for I couldn’t paint half as well myself, and you may be right. I—’

‘It is not right. The whole of that foreground is wrong, and you could do it a great deal better. You wouldn’t have known how to find fault otherwise,’ Jenny interrupted sharply, and then shut the book with a bang as if to put a stop to further criticism. It was shockingly rude of the second Miss Dysart —I am not making any excuse for her—and Sybil felt quite ashamed of her sister. She came to the rescue by rising as if they were about going home, and Jenny’s action had been only preparatory to the same.

‘Jenny does not mind looking her faults in the face,’ she said, pleasantly. ‘I am far vainer ; for I’m afraid I like to be praised over what I do, whether I deserve it or not.’

‘I should call that sensitiveness, not vanity,’ said Lionel gently ; but before the paths of peace thus retraced could be pursued, poor Jenny’s sudden aggressiveness forced her to put in,—

‘You might *call* it so, but it would only be from politeness if you did. Wanting praise for everything, good or bad, is vanity; and I remember you once saying so yourself.’

‘You have a better memory than I,’ said Lion coldly; and then Sybil saw that further efforts were useless and said good-bye.

‘Are you going home? I am going in that direction too,’ he said, eagerly, ‘and if you would let me carry your books—’

But though Sybil thanked him very sweetly, and with the softest light in her eyes, she would not consent. Jenny and she were going on a little farther first, and she would not trouble him with her books. They were no weight. She held out her hand as she spoke, and Lion had no resource but to take it and go on his way. The interview, instead of bringing them nearer, had made him feel farther off than ever. He went away feeling as if he had been virtually dismissed.

Book II.

CHAPTER I.

THE FACE ON THE EASEL.

‘I DON’T know what you come here for at all,’ said Mrs Beverley. ‘My dear Belle, because you want me so badly.’

It was Gareth Vane who answered. It was in London, and he was lounging in the corner of a luxurious sofa, his handsome Greek face, the face which had dazzled Sybil Dysart’s eyes in the turnip-field many months ago, only half turned, with an expression, part purely lazy, part good-humouredly amused, on the woman who stood fretting and tapping one small foot impatiently against the marble fender. She whisked round on him, her eyes flashing.

‘How dare you, Gareth? I won’t allow you to talk that way to me, and it’s not true. I am not your dear Belle, and I don’t want you here at all.’

‘Don’t you? I’m so sorry—really. Do you know, I fancied, as you asked me here so often, that you did,’ Gareth said,

gently ; a gentleness which remained perfectly unruffled by her angry exclamation, as he went on : ' And as for the rest, so beautiful as you are, you must own to the title " Belle ; " and I can't help your being dear to me. Indeed, I don't think I've ever tried. Do you wish me to begin ? '

The black eyes lost their angry flash and grew soft in a moment ; yet she still spoke, petulantly,—

' Now you want to make up to me ; but I won't have it, Gareth. I don't care for you a bit ; and I don't believe that you care, or could care, for anyone in the world but yourself.'

' I don't think I do—much,' said Gareth languidly. ' One's self is so much nearer than other people, and therefore so much more interesting, you know. One feels all its wants and pains so tenderly ; and then it never allows itself to be forgotten. It is rather wearisome at times, however, and, whatever you may think, I do get tired of mine now and then.'

' Poor fellow ! do you really ? ' cried Mrs Beverley, laughing at his mock, plaintive tone. ' I wonder you don't supplement it by—'

' Another self ? Why didn't you finish ? You know that was what you were going to say. Suppose I can't ? '

' I was not going to say that ; but it would have been reasonable enough all the same, and I confess I don't see the " can't." I do not believe there is a man living who couldn't get some woman to accept him.'

' *Si fait !* But suppose—it's only a suppose, you know—that I were so exacting that " some " woman wouldn't content me.'

' Then find another,' said Mrs Beverley, laughing. ' Goodness knows there are enough in this over-womaned country of ours ! '

' Over-womaned ! ' Gareth repeated with sudden and bitter emphasis. ' Do you call it that ? By Heaven ! I should have thought there were less women in it—real women, womanly women, such as we read of in times gone by, or dream of when we are sick or mad—than in any other country under the sun, except America. Even Italian contessas have one womanly trait at any rate—they are weak : weak enough to kneel to shrines, and crave for absolution ; weak enough to fall outright when they do fall ; but here— Well, most women have had mothers—I suppose I had, though I don't remember her—and some have sisters ; but, egad ! I wonder at any man having a wife.'

' You are excessively rude,' said Mrs Beverley.

She was really angry now, and her cheeks were flushed with a deep red which quite extinguished the delicate spot of rose-colour her maid had planted there rather earlier in the day. She took her foot off the fender as she spoke, and caine and stood in front of him, the very impersonation of a wrathful, Eastern queen, low-browed and full-busted, with hair black as ink, cut in a short, shining wave over the forehead, and gathered up behind into a knot of curls fastened with a gold band. Her costume was Eastern too, being a loose tunic of some soft, orange-coloured material, draped about a plain, tightly-fitting robe of deep-purple velvet, which came up to the throat and down to the elbows, showing as much of a pair of round, creamy-white arms as was not hidden by the link on link of heavy gold bangles which glittered on them. A handsome, dazzling-looking woman: never more so than when her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes glittering as now; yet not what you would specify as 'womanly' all the same. Perhaps that was why the idle barb stuck.

'You, of all men, too,' she exclaimed, 'to talk in that way! You who in your heart hate prudes and prigs as much as I do, and would as little tolerate a woman who went and sought absolution for her flirtations with you as I should despise the man who tattled his to his wife. I wonder at you.'

'So do I,' said Gareth meekly. His momentary flash of earnestness was over, and he spoke with his usual lazy nonchalance. 'It was very foolish of me to talk in that way—to you! Please forgive me before I go. I apologise.'

'You are not going,' said Mrs Beverley quickly, for he had risen up and was holding out his hand. 'What's that for?'

'Because I must. Good-bye.'

'What nonsense! I won't hear of it. Sit down again. Why, there's a ring at the bell; my friends are only just coming.'

'Very sorry, but I came to see you, Belle, not your friends; and having done so—'

'And made yourself as disagreeable as possible! If you want to go, Gareth Vane, pray do so, and as soon as possible. No one wishes to keep you.'

She turned from him as she spoke to greet the new comer—a tall military-looking foreigner—and as Gareth went downstairs he heard her exclaim,—

'My dear prince, I am so glad you came to see me to-day. That is one of the most unbearable men in London.'

The young man laughed a little as he left the house. He

knew the words were meant for him to hear ; but he also knew that most likely before that time next day he would be receiving a little sea-blue tinted note, couched in playfully affectionate terms, and giving him some commission for Mrs Beverley which would necessitate a speedy call from him ; and her present irascibility did not weigh very heavily on his spirits. Belle was his cousin in a sense ; a widow, still young, though a year or two older than himself, with plenty of money, the prettiest pair of ponies in London, a house in Kensington and another at Ryde ; and at both these houses Gareth was to be found more frequently than at those of any other friend, and was sure of always finding a welcome. Some people said they were engaged ; others that they would be, if Mrs Beverley had her will, but that Gareth hung back ; others, again, that it was only a long-standing flirtation, with no serious meaning on either side. Belle Beverley was known to be rather fond of flirtations, and to carry them farther than most women in society are willing to do. But Gareth was the standing favourite and knew it, though to the world he always assumed that she only cared for him as a 'cousin,' 'and the deuce was in it if a man mightn't go to see his own cousin as often as he liked, more especially when she was a widow, poor thing ! with no father or brother to help her ;' while Mrs Beverley took the same stand, and spoke of him as 'poor dear Tom's nearest relative and friend,' declaring that that departed saint had begged her to always look to Gareth for brotherly care and guardianship, and that she was therefore bound to consider his wishes.

As a matter of fact it was not Gareth at all, but his half-sister, Mrs Hamilton, the wife of a fashionable physician at Surbiton, who was 'poor dear Tom's' cousin ; and as that good man's claims to sainthood had chiefly lain in a long martyrdom of wrongs patiently endured, and jealousies keenly suffered and wantonly inflicted at his wife's hands, it is hardly to be wondered at if people were found to scoff at the widow's explanations, and credit young Vane with a nearer claim on her regard than mere kinship to her happily-departed husband.

'One of your fair and fast widows : ' 'A woman who goes the pace : ' 'No nonsense about her.' Those were the terms in which Belle Beverley was spoken of among men ; and many ladies would not admit her to their society, and pulled long faces at the mention of her name ; but Mrs Hamilton, who lived at Surbiton, and saw very little of her quasi-relative, only

thought her rather loud and imprudent, and would have been glad to see Gareth married to her. He wanted a wife, and a wife with money, for he had nearly run through his own little property, and his wildness and irregularities kept his sister in perpetual anxiety for him. Perhaps if he were once married he would settle down and grow steady; and if Belle had faults, there might be worse women, and he would get on better with her than with a girl who would only be shocked with his ways. Mrs Hamilton was very fond of her brother; but her opinion of these 'ways,' and, indeed, of those of men in general, was not high; and she was inclined to think that his wife would have to be very tolerant by nature to be either happy herself or make him so.

Gareth was going down to Surbiton now. He reached there about an hour before dinner, and having made his way, with a good deal of delay and difficulty, through a small troop of children, who rushed off the croquet-lawn and clung to his arms and legs imploring him to join in their game, was shown into the drawing-room, where Mrs Hamilton was writing a letter. She looked up at his entrance and smiled pleasantly, giving him her cheek to kiss.

'Why, Gareth, this is good. I am glad to see you. It is quite a long time since you have been here. Was it you the children were making such an uproar over just now? I could hear them through the window.'

'Yes; they caught hold of me, and insisted on my being a bear, as they were playing at wild beasts,' said Gareth, dropping into a chair and tossing his curls back. 'Is my coat split up the back, Helen? It ought to be, for Fred sprang on my shoulders and held on to the collar just as I was giving Winny an ursine hug. I hope I haven't killed him; but I had to chuck him into the nearest bush to get clear.'

'You spoil the children dreadfully. It's no wonder they worship you as they do, Gareth; but it is very bad for them,' Mrs Hamilton said reprovingly.

Gareth laughed.

'Bah! a little spoiling does no one any harm. You may spoil me if you like. I assure you I want it.'

'As if you were not utterly spoilt already! What have you been doing with yourself of late? Nothing good, of course.'

She was standing over him as she spoke in very much the same position as Belle Beverley a couple of hours earlier, but with no other resemblance to the former woman. Tall and

commanding-looking, with a face which had been very handsome once—which would have been handsome now, in spite of her seven-and-thirty years, but for a certain harshness of expression, and a complexion so absolutely colourless as to look almost ghastly in a strong light—with plenty of dark glossy hair and a good figure, always set off by handsome clothes, Mrs Hamilton was an eminently personable dignified-looking woman; and though her last words sounded ungentle in themselves, there was no lack of sisterly kindness in the tone which accompanied them. Gareth looked up at her still smiling.

‘Nothing very bad. Writing a little, playing a good deal, losing some money, and quarrelling with Belle Beverley; also a few other things which I can’t call to mind at present. There’s frankness for you.’

Mrs Hamilton shook her head.

‘You might have omitted “losing money” from the list, Gareth. When you say “playing,” that includes the other. People who are always gambling must lose money.’

‘Except when they win. I never thought much about it, but I suppose someone must win occasionally, mustn’t they?’ Gareth asked innocently; but his sister was not to be joked with.

‘And when are you going to leave off flirting with Belle Beverley and marry her? It would be better for you.’

‘Perhaps; but she hasn’t asked me to do so yet. When she does—’

‘Have you asked her? That would be more to the purpose. Not that I admire her myself, or like her style in any way; but you really ought to get married; and if she cares for you as—’

‘As you have no right to suppose. I don’t, I assure you; and to prove it, I may tell you she turned me out of the house only to-day.’

‘I daresay you deserved it.’

‘I daresay I did. Anyhow, I have come here in order to be consoled by you for the affliction. How’s the doctor, Helen?’

‘Very well, I believe. I suppose he will be in soon. It will be dinner-time directly.’

The dressing-bell was ringing as she spoke; and when, about ten minutes later, the second one sounded, Mrs Hamilton and her brother went down to dinner together. Dr Hamilton had not yet come home. He was a very clever physician in large practice; and it was one of the household ordinances that if he were not in at meal-times he should not be waited for. Gareth was aware of the rule, and thought it rather a good

one where children were in question ; yet he sometimes wondered that at the late dinner, when they were only two as now, Helen did not give her husband a few minutes' 'law ;' or even order the soup to be brought back when he came in to-day, just as it had been taken down, looking as tired and exhausted as a man hard at work, mind and body, since morning, might be expected to do. Did she sit down all the same if she were alone, the young man questioned in himself, and go on eating as calmly as she did now, barely even pausing to look round when her husband entered? True, it was a way in the Surbiton household not to make a fuss over its master ; but, on the other hand, Helen was so indisputably mistress in that household, that its ways were hers ; and Gareth frequently found himself wondering how his brother-in-law liked it. 'I shouldn't, I know, by Jove !' he told himself emphatically.

Dr Hamilton did not seem to mind, however. He was a tall spare man, with a pleasant, refined cast of features, and manners very gentle and courteous. Perhaps there was a trifle of sadness in his expression, and an occasional tendency to very polished irony in his tone and words ; but these were no drawbacks to him among his friends and patients, with whom—the ladies especially—he was an immense favourite : getting, indeed, enough *kudos* abroad to almost indemnify him for a little neglect at home.

'I'm very glad to find you here, Gareth. How are you, and why don't you come oftener ?' he said, nodding kindly to his brother-in-law, and beginning to eat his dinner very fast, with the air of a man who has been keeping other people waiting for him ; though in point of fact it was only Gareth who even made a pretence of doing so. 'By the way, Helen,' glancing at his wife, 'Mrs Jameson sent her love to you to-day, and asked me to tell you she was coming to call to-morrow.'

Mrs Hamilton looked up at him, a quick keen flash in her dark eyes.

'She is very kind. I do not know that I shall be at home to-morrow. So *that* is where you have been this afternoon ! I don't wonder you are late for dinner. It is a long drive from Randall's Manor ; but I had not heard that anyone there was ill.'

'Neither have I,' said the doctor pleasantly ; 'and as it happens I haven't been near Randall's Manor. I met Mrs Jameson in Kingstown this afternoon, and she stopped the carriage to give me that message for you. If it isn't incon-

venient to you, though, Helen, I should be glad if you could be at home when she calls. She is a touchy woman, and the family are rather valuable as patients.'

Mrs Hamilton made no answer. Perhaps she did not hear. There was a ring at the door-bell just then, and the next moment the page entered with a note for the doctor. General Somebody had been taken suddenly ill, and his wife had sent the carriage. Would the doctor go 'at once?' The poor doctor was in the act of cutting a slice of mutton for himself; but he dropped his knife and fork, and rose on the instant. Perhaps one secret of his popularity was the promptitude with which he always attended to his patients' calls; but Gareth never thought of this, and exclaimed indignantly,—

'Why, doctor, you're not going now? you've had no dinner! Hang it all, can't they wait a little?'

'Well, people in general won't wait to die, even while their doctor finishes his dinner,' said the doctor, hastily working himself into his greatcoat which the footman was holding for him.

'Thanks, Gar,' as the younger man poured him out a glass of wine, and pressed it on him. 'It is a bother, isn't it, and just when you're here? Never mind! I shall see you when I get back. I mayn't be long,' and he was gone.

'You had better take the foot of the table again, Gareth,' said Mrs Hamilton quietly. 'James, change Mr Vane's plate; his mutton has got quite cold. I'm afraid you are having a most uncomfortable dinner, my dear.'

Gareth could not help looking at her in astonishment. It was very kind of Helen to be so solicitous for his comfort; but it would have been more natural after all if she had shown a little wisely anxiety for her husband in preference, had said something sympathetic to the poor man as he went out from his barely tasted meal; or scolded, however unreasonably, at the people who summoned him away from it. Of course, every woman with any common sense knows that a medical man is liable to these disturbances, and must put up with them if he is to succeed in his profession; but mere common sense, however valuable a quality in general, does grate on us now and then, when we happen to be looking for warm-heartedness instead; and Gareth almost felt impatient when his sister went on to question him about some literary work on which he was engaged, without any further comment on her husband's departure.

'Rather hard on Hamilton, isn't it, being dragged about in

this way?' he said, after answering her rather shortly. 'It doesn't often happen, I hope?'

'Not oftener than with most doctors, I suppose,' replied Mrs Hamilton. 'Every profession has its little drawbacks, as a matter of course.'

'By Jove! I shouldn't call going without my dinner after tramping about all day a *little* drawback,' cried Gareth. 'I suppose you always have it kept hot for him against he comes back.'

'Not unless he wishes it. I never know when he is coming back, you know. To-night he may very probably dine at the general's. The old man often has these fits.'

As it happened, however, Dr Hamilton did not dine at the general's, and indeed returned in rather less than an hour, just as the other two were having their coffee in the drawing-room.

'The old fellow had rallied before I got there,' he said, wearily. 'He'll go off in the next, however. Is there any dinner for me downstairs, Helen?'

'Did you give any orders about it? I do not know if they will have kept anything otherwise,' she said, calmly. 'If you will touch the bell I will ask.' And Gareth, watching his brother-in-law rather curiously, wondered to see him obey without any comment; and when a message came up that everything was nearly cold, as cook had had no orders, content himself with a slightly sarcastic shrug, instead of the burst of wrath in which many men would have felt themselves justified.

'Cook will heat it up, sir, in a few minutes, if you wish,' said the boy; but his master shook his head.

'I should be too tired to eat if I waited any longer. I'll have some coffee and bread and butter and some quite cold meat, if there is any in the house, in my study. Be quick with it.'

'Upon my soul, doctor, you're the easiest man I know!' cried Gareth boldly; though he saw his sister's pallid face flush at the words. The physician smiled a trifle bitterly.

'My dear boy, a wise man never quarrels with what can't be remedied. You young bachelors pay a landlady to wait on you; and you expect to be waited on. It is one of the benefits of your state. Let me advise you to keep to it.'

Gareth was on the point of saying that he had always understood married men were better cared for than bachelors; but an instinct of delicacy towards his sister, who was always kinder and more affectionate to him than to anyone save her own children, withheld him; and he contented himself with answering, somewhat emphatically: 'I mean to do so,' and with volunteer-

ing to sit downstairs with the doctor while the latter was eating.

The study was a small room, but very comfortable, and fitted up with an amount of artistic taste, not to say elegance, which made it widely different from most medical men's sanctums. There were a great many books, of course, and most of them technical ones ; but there were also three or four really valuable pictures, some rare bronzes and etchings, a very fair collection of old, blue Chelsea plates lining the walls, a small copy of Gibson's *Venus* was standing on an ebony pedestal in a little, velvet-framed niche, and, on an easel near the window, a cabinet picture by Leslie—one of those dainty girl heads which no other painter seems able to accomplish with equal purity and beauty. Gareth went over to examine it at once. He knew the doctor was a lover of the fine arts, and that he generally kept his latest treasure on view in that position.

'Leslie, eh ?' he said, glancing at the initials in the corner. 'Why, Hamilton, you've made a find this time and no mistake. What a jolly little face !'

'Do you think so ?' said the doctor pleasantly ; though at Gareth's first movement towards the easel his face had flushed slightly as if with annoyance. 'I got it at the Dudley. They have just sent it home. Yes, girls' faces are his forte.'

'He's been fortunate in this one, anyhow,' said Gareth. 'The modelling of the chin is exquisite, and those round, forget-me-not blue eyes— Stay, where the deuce have I seen a pair like them ? Indeed, the whole face was like. Is it a portrait of anyone you know, doctor ?'

'Certainly not,' said his brother-in-law, adding, with some decision : 'I should say that it was an entirely imaginary face. Not that there is anything out of the common in it.'

'I don't know that,' Gareth answered, shaking his head. 'If I were lucky enough to meet the girl to whom it belonged I should feel a heap more inclined to fall in love with her than with nine out of ten of the girls I do meet. The odd thing is that I believe I have seen her ! Look here, Helen,' as there was a tap at the door, and Mrs Hamilton just put in her head to urge him to stay the night with them. 'You've seen this picture. Is it like anyone you know ?'

Mrs Hamilton came up slowly, and looked first at the picture, and then, more keenly, at her husband, who was drinking his coffee at the moment and did not look up.

'No,' she said, shortly ; 'and I had not seen it before. I

did not even know Dr Hamilton had bought it. It is probably the portrait of someone he— But before she could finish, Gareth interrupted her with an exclamation,—

‘I have it! I knew I had seen a face like it; though it’s not one that either of you would know: a little girl I met at the corner of a turnip-field near Leatherhead when I was shooting down there in September. By Jove! I nearly shot her, and frightened all the colour out of her sweet little face. I thought I couldn’t forget it; and certainly for a chance likeness this is the strongest I’ve ever seen. Well, I rather envy you it, Hamilton.’

CHAPTER II.

AN ILL-ASSORTED COUPLE.

‘It is no use talking to you, I know; yet I do wish you would take my advice in one respect at least,’ Mrs Hamilton said to her brother that evening. ‘Marry; settle down and marry.’ And Gareth repeated the counsel to himself with a half-ironical smile half-an-hour afterwards, when, having resisted all persuasions to stay and sleep, said good-night to his hosts and kissed the children in their cots, he found himself in the train again *en route* for London, and calculating that he should be in time for some supper at the Criterion even yet.

“Settle down and marry!” Ay, that’s Helen’s advice always. I wonder if she has any idea that I never feel less inclined to take it than after an evening at her house. And she’s a good woman too; manages it capitally; is fond of her children; breaks none of the commandments; a perfect Lucrecre and Cornelia rolled into one; and yet— Good heavens! to think of that sort of thing being the sum and completion of a man’s life. To be called Mr Vane, and told, when I come in hungry or tired, to ring the bell and ask if the servants have thought of keeping any dinner for me! Hamilton, poor devil! doesn’t look as if he enjoyed it very much; and, on the whole, I think it’s his advice I ought to go by, not his wife’s. He takes it more quietly than I should, however. I’d kick up the deuce and all of a row with a woman who treated me as Helen does him; either that or leave her altogether; for I couldn’t live with a wife whom I wanted to thrash every time I looked at her.

No, better go to the devil one's own way, and by oneself, if marriage is to be an alternative between a wife like my good sister yonder, or a beautiful tiger-cat like Belle Beverley, and the pleasure of never knowing what man's hat you'll find hanging up in your hall when you come home unexpectedly. Yet there are a few women of another sort, I suppose. Tom Sinclair's young wife, now. She's a perfect rosebud of sweetness—not to me, hates me, of course, because I lead Tom astray!—but to him; and that little girl with the Leslie face and innocent, blue eyes—Would she develop into the stony British matron? Poor Hamilton! I'm very fond of Helen, but I do pity him; and yet I daresay he thought it quite a catch once.'

If he had not, other people had, and had held up their hands in wonder and envy when, thirteen years before, John Hamilton, a young Scotch surgeon, without a farthing of his own and no prospects, married Helen Vane, a young woman with an independent fortune of something like eighteen hundred a-year, sound health, a fine complexion, and stainless reputation. It was like his luck, people said. He had always been a lucky man, seeing that he had already managed to make a little name for himself in the fashionable town of Brighton, where he had taken up his quarters, and to write a paper on 'Throats' (feminine throats especially) in *The Lancet*, which had even attracted some attention in the medical world outside. His appearance, too, was in his favour. Tall and graceful, with dark melancholy eyes, a good voice, a white hand, and manners at once soothing and refined, he was sure to win with the women folk at any rate. They said he was such a dear, looked like a duke; and, indeed, few dukes could have dressed in better taste, ridden a better horse, or been better appointed in every way than the young doctor, who made no secret of the fact that his private means were *nil* and his career all before him.

'How did he manage to do it?' was the question which other men asked and got no answer to. The only evident thing was that he did do it, and that his so doing was in itself an assistance to his success. We all know Leigh Hunt's saying about the huckster with one egg, and certainly the less a man looks as if he needs help, the more ready the world in general is to help him—the world's big-wigs in particular. When Dr Forceps-Brown, the well-known Brighton physician, spoke to his brother ditto ditto in Surbiton of young Hamilton as a decidedly rising man, popular with women, and likely to

do credit as a partner, even to a practitioner of the Forceps-Brown calibre, he did the clever young surgeon a good turn, which would never have occurred to him if the latter had gone about with a shabby coat, or ill-brushed hair, or combined prescriptions with the sale of drugs in a dingy little surgery, like so many of his co-practitioners ; and when the elder Forceps-Brown, for forty years past the most fashionable ladies' physician in Surbiton, intimated to young Hamilton that he would be willing to take him in the capacity suggested, and in the course of a few more years to dispose of the practice to him altogether, he showed a confidence in his brother's advice which the result fully justified.

It was one of those chances in life which nine men out of ten miss, and which come to the tenth only once in the whole course of his career. Young Hamilton caught at his luck gratefully, and, with it, apparently at something even greater ; for, almost simultaneously with the news of his promotion, came that of his engagement to Miss Vane, the heiress, then staying at Brighton for the bathing season. He married her three months later, and the account of their wedding, of the bride's dress, and the bride's beauty, of the bridesmaids' lockets, and the bridal presents, filled half a column in *The Morning Post*. Was the world wrong in envying John Hamilton, and pronouncing him a most fortunate young man ?

He took his honours very quietly. Raised suddenly from comparative poverty to affluence, with his future fully secured to him at an age when most men are toiling for the mere present, and a young and handsome wife, so devoted to him that, even during their brief engagement, her passionate admiration of her betrothed had been the occasion for some jesting among their mutual acquaintances ; he bore about with him a subdued gravity and seriousness of manner which had no sign of pride or inflation in it ; while the gentle sadness in his dark eyes, which had been found so winning by the sentimental among his fair patients, seemed rather to deepen than to decrease with his good fortune ; and, instead of being the silky-speeched ladies' man his partner had expected, old Forceps-Brown wrote to his brother that the Surbiton dames and damsels spoke of Mr Hamilton as being exceedingly clever, but rather too serious and sparing of words for so young and pleasant-looking a man. No one could certainly have shown less elation or worn his good fortune more unobtrusively.

Of course there were not wanting people to give their own explanation of this unwonted sobriety and moderation in a young man who might have been expected to be rather conceited and 'upnish' in the large slice of luck that had fallen to him ; and, naturally, the most generally assigned reason was that his attachment to Miss Vane had been rather for the *beaux yeux de sa cassette* than for the person of the young lady herself, and that if he could have had the former without the latter he would have been just as well pleased. Some even asserted that he would have been sufficiently unmercenary to dispense with both, but that the heiress had positively thrown herself at his head, and asked him to marry her ; while others declared that it was pecuniary embarrassments which constrained him to the union in question, and that he had been actually engaged to someone else—a humble little Scotch girl—whom want of means alone prevented him from marrying, and who died of grief on reading the account of his wedding with the wealthy Miss Vane—a misfortune for which he had never forgiven himself. But as nobody had ever heard of the Scotch sweetheart before Dr Hamilton's engagement to Miss Vane, and as till then he had been a rather general admirer of the fair sex, and had even been bestowed on two or three already in imagination, it may be believed that the world, always ill-natured, had invented the whole story, as well as that of the monetary embarrassments, of which the Brighton tradesmen, at any rate, were not cognisant.

There is always a grain of truth, however, in every bushel of lies ; and perhaps the fact that Helen Vane was very much in love with her *fiancé*, and, being an heiress and a spoilt child, disdained to make any secret of the fact, either during her betrothal or bridehood, was sufficient substratum of verity for all the fictional castles afterwards erected on it. Young ladies with eighteen hundred pounds a-year, without the salutary check of cold-blooded parents or elder relatives (for Miss Vane was an orphan, with no nearer relation than her half-brother Gareth, then a boy at school), and accustomed from childhood to be bowed down to and made much of on every side, are apt to be less timid in expressing their feelings and opinions than girls in general ; and, perhaps, being of a frank, liberal nature, the fact that John Hamilton was almost the only unmarried man she had ever met who did not begin to make love to her at once, and who, even after her acceptance of him, managed to maintain a certain dignity and reticence in his wooing,

helped to raise him in her estimation, and make her more ready to yield him, of her own free will, what he was too much a man to slavishly sue for.

No bad disposition for entering on married life ! What was it, then, which had changed the fair prospect so sadly, and frozen the proud enthusiastic young bride into the callous, sharp-tongued, indifferent wife, whose coldness to her husband made even Gareth Vane shrug his shoulders in pity for one and blame for the other ?

No falling off on the doctor's side at any rate. Less than two years after their marriage an old Brighton friend visiting them wrote to her family there :—‘ You would hardly know Mrs Hamilton ; marriage has so changed her. She looks ten years older than when she was at Brighton ; has quite lost her high spirits and that fine colour people used to admire in her ; and in place of running after her husband, drinking in his words as if no one else were worth listening to, and worshipping him in the ridiculous way she used to do when she was first married, she hardly ever looks at him, goes her own way entirely, and always seems to avoid speaking to him unless she is obliged. People say that they even sit in different rooms of an evening, and though they have one baby, a fine child and the image of the doctor, the mother evidently can't bear to see it in its father's arms, and makes herself so jealous and disagreeable if he notices or interferes with it in the most trivial way, that the poor man is almost afraid to look at his own child. As for him, however, he is just the same as he always was ; just as gracious, pleasant, and kindly, and a model husband—never saying a sharp word to his wife, giving in to her in everything, and really paying her more deference and attention than he did in his courting days.’

And it was true. Dr Hamilton did so both in public and in private. As Gareth saw him on the evening described, so he was, whether seen or not, on all the other evenings in the year ; and if he had been a somewhat lukewarm lover, or had had any self-interest in his wooing, he made up for it as a husband and a man much richer now through his profession than he was through his wife, by such unwearied gentleness, kindness and forbearance as few women meet with in their married lives. Mrs Hamilton's smallest wishes were consulted, her slightest word was law in the home where she had now reigned for thirteen years ; and her husband's consideration for her even extended to the children ; for, though a man of warm fatherly

and domestic instincts, he forced himself to restrain both in deference to the strange unnatural jealousy of his wife, and to deny himself the pleasure of sharing his boys' amusements and his girl's caresses rather than arouse the pain and anger which his not doing so would have excited.

The little Hamiltons were kept so much from their father, and had been so early checked in any over-demonstrativeness of affection to him, that they grew up shy and formal with him as with a visitor, especially in their mother's presence ; yet the cordial sweetness of his eyes and voice, and his unvarying kindness to them all, could not but have their effect on the little hearts, sensitive to affection as children's always are ; and when Mrs Hamilton, who was in her way a most conscientious mother, taught little Dolly that ' Honour your father and your mother' meant love as well as obedience to her parents, the child looked up smilingly and said,—

' Then I does it ; for I loves you and I loves papa too. Willie says he loves papa betterer because he never scolds anybody ; and when Willie's a man he's going to be a doctor too, and always go out with papa everywhere, and help him cure people, he says. Is it naughty of him, mamma, to say it, that you look so ? Are you angry ? '

' I shall be angry if you chatter instead of saying your lesson,' said Mrs Hamilton coldly. ' Your papa would scold both you and Willie well if he had any of the trouble with you that I take every day and all day. But you are ungrateful children : ' and there was such an understrain of bitterness in her tone that poor Dolly felt vaguely that she had been naughty as well as Willie ; and that when mamma said children were to love their fathers, she did not mean that they should love them very much ; not as much as mammas, for instance. Yet when an hour later Mrs Hamilton met Willie just as he had achieved the unhallowed, because forbidden, act of sliding down the handrail of the first-floor staircase, she did not scold him as the culprit fully expected, but just put her hand on his neck, saying,—

' Child, that is very dangerous. Don't do it again ; ' and then give him one of those sudden close kisses which always made the youngsters stare at her with wide, wondering eyes, and question in their little souls why mamma's eyes so often looked as if they wanted to cry when she kissed them.

God pity a home so fashioned, and in such a hard, loveless, untender fashion ! God pity every home where husband and wife are not one but two, and where the children form elements

of discord and division instead of golden links binding two loving hearts in even closer union !

Even men pitied Dr Hamilton ; men and women too ; for at forty-three the doctor's talents and amiability made him as popular as he had been at thirty ; but few even of those who liked his wife pitied her. How could she need it when she had really everything that woman could wish for ?

She did not seem to desire compassion. Her hard pale face had never looked harder than when she came downstairs, candle in hand, and stepping softly, about a couple of hours after Gareth's departure. The whole house was quiet then ; for the children had been in their cots long before, the servants always went to bed at ten, and even Dr Hamilton, tired with his day's work, had retired to rest. But there was no sleepiness in Mrs Hamilton's eyes as she glided across the hall, and opening the door of the doctor's study very softly, stole up to the picture on which her brother had been commenting earlier on that evening. Its position was changed now. The easel had been pulled more into the middle of the room, and her husband's chair stood in front of it, as if he had been sitting there to admire his purchase, while the canvas was carefully covered with a fine cloth as though to guard it from servants' eyes and fingers. Mrs Hamilton's dark eager eyes, glittering with such unnatural brightness in the ashen pallor of her face, marked each little change at once ; and there was a quiver in both lips and fingers as she removed the cover and bent down, examining and re-examining the pictured face beneath with a hungry scrutiny which seemed as if it would fain have torn from it the likeness of some suspected original.

'He would never have looked so pale and disturbed if it were a mere fancy portrait,' she muttered to herself. 'Is it like anyone ? The hair is the same colour as that—but everyone has golden hair now. It proves nothing.' She stood up again at last, and replaced the cover with a weary unsatisfied sigh. Her husband's portrait hung over the mantelpiece and she went up to it, and stood gazing at the face for some moments with a strange yearning look, even reaching out her hand to wipe almost tenderly a little dust which was dimming a portion of the painting. Even in the act, however, a change came over her face. One low piteous moan did break from her lips ; but she stifled it at once by burying her face on her arms, and then stood still for some moments struggling mutely with the deep gasping sobs which shook her whole frame.

The conflict did not last long. Ten minutes later the study was again empty, and Mrs Hamilton might have been seen entering her own room, candle in hand, and stepping softly as she had left it, but the look on her face was different even in the short time that had elapsed. It was worn and haggard. She looked like a woman of fifty rather than of thirty-seven; and her pale lips were still shaking with the excitement that had been raised in her husband's study as she set down the candle and wiped the damp from her brow where it was standing in huge beads.

'God help me!' whispered the unhappy woman to herself. 'God have mercy on me! How shall I be able to bear my life till the end? And my children—my poor children!'

CHAPTER III.

POST-PRANDIAL.

THE Ashleighs of the Hall were going to give a dinner-party; quite a small affair, but a formal one; a dinner, in fact, in honour of the infant grandson having attained the age of one calendar month, or, as the Rector's wife put it, of 'the success of the swivel-necked feeding-bottle.' Lionel was bidden to it, of course, as a scion of the house; and Sybil Dysart also, either as her mother's representative, or—at least this was the latter's secret hope—as a sort of tacit suggestion of her connection in prospective with the aforementioned scion. Jenny was not asked, being too young and insignificant to have any claim to appear at formal dinner-parties; and when Lion ascertained the fact, he felt, with an injustice to poor Jenny which was most ungrateful, that things might be beginning to look up for him again, and the sun to shine on his fortunes.

For there had seemed nothing but clouds for him ever since the day of that meeting in the wood. It was the same in his case as it is with a good many other young men. The first chill thrown on his love was like a cold draught on a fire—only serving to blow it into a far fiercer flame and fervour than he himself had thought was in it; while at the same time it increased his distance from its object by exaggerating his disadvantages in proportion to her merits. And Sybil's own conduct on that unlucky day had gone farther to increase this

sense of alienation and hopelessness than even her mother's coldness or Jenny's petulance and rudeness. If it were only they who were against him he would not so much care. If she had even adopted her sister's tone, he would have put it down to some coquettish whim, or offence of his, and found a plea in it to ask for an explanation. But that gentle, cool indifference, too intangible to give cause for complaint, and yet too chilling to be ignored by anyone less insensitive than a pachyderm, had at once irritated and tantalised him beyond endurance, and he hailed this chance of seeing her without her family as a means both of letting her know his feelings and finding out her own.

The beginning was a bad one. Some parish work delayed him just at the last moment ; and, therefore, instead of arriving early, as he intended, he entered the drawing-room to find the whole party assembled and only waiting for him, and his father with his watch in his hand and an angry eye on it. Sir William, however, cut short his apologies in genial fashion.

'Not a word, my dear boy. Weren't waiting for you at all. Never do in this house for doctors or parsons. Victoria, my dear, take my arm.'

Lionel looked round him. The people were all pairing off as if by previous arrangement. Sir William had led the way with his daughter-in-law, as the queen of the occasion ; and what queen is there so lofty and serene in her conscious dignity as an eldest son's wife who has just succeeded in presenting the house with a son and heir ? Is it paralleled by anything but the pathetic humiliation of the childless woman in the same position, who seeing her duty to do likewise, has yet failed in it, and failed persistently ? Lord Strathbitham, a precise, shrivelled-up little Scotch peer, uncle to the Hon. Victoria, took in Lady Ashleigh ; while John, more sedate and middle-aged of young men, yet with a certain mild complacency about him at present, inasmuch as though the baby was no doubt Victoria's achievement, the credit for it redounded at least in part on himself, gave his arm to cheery little Lady Strathbitham, and inflicted the excellences of his wife and son on her all the way downstairs. Squire Chawler, a red-faced gentleman of the old school, and an old friend and neighbour of Sir William's, took down Mrs Ashleigh, who detested him ; and the Rector did the same for his wife, one of those flat, plain, uninteresting women, who have not enough in them to be detested by anybody ; and the younger ones only being

left to be disposed of, Lion was just hugging himself on the thought, that Sybil, to whom he had not yet spoken, was reserved for him, when his cousin Adelaide left her own lover's side, and crossing the room to him put her hand on his arm.

'You may take me, Lion,' she said, smiling; 'for I see nothing of you at present, and Bertie and I are quite tired of one another. Besides, you can see as much of Sybil as you like at Chadleigh End.'

It was very cruel. Adelaide was a nice, dear girl, and perhaps she meant it kindly in speaking of Sybil and himself as though they stood in the same relation to each other as she and her betrothed—a tall bronzed sailor, who appeared in no wise tired of her; but it was very cruel all the same. And the worst of it was, that Sybil did not seem to mind it at all, but looked up at Captain Lonsdale with just the same soft sweet smile with which she had greeted *him* a moment back, and went downstairs looking so placidly lovely that he could almost have hated the young officer for having, however innocently, deprived him of the pleasure to which he had been looking forward.

Indeed, Sybil had seldom looked better than she did that night. All the rest of the ladies were in very full dress; the Hon. Victoria, one of those stony-looking young women with lofty foreheads, long large noses, and pale-coloured hair, dressed rigidly à la Princess of Wales, showing such an expanse of snow-white neck and shoulders, that it was perhaps as well that the baby had only been introduced for two minutes before dinner, arrayed in a gorgeous robe, and in the arms of a more gorgeous nurse, and had then been removed quickly to have its spirit comforted with the swivel-necked bottle; while Lady Margaret and Mrs Ashleigh rivalled each other in their myrtle-green and heliotrope-coloured velvet robes, adorned with such old Brussels point as made Mrs Chawler's eyes grow round with envy. But Mrs Dysart had dressed Sybil as simply as possible in a gown of soft creamy-white Indian muslin, coming close up to her throat and down to her elbows, where it was finished off with little ruffles gathered round the waist, and flowing away from her limbs in long simple folds of semi-transparent softness, which gave her something the look of a Greek nymph. She had not even a flower or a ribbon on it, and only one white *eucharis* half hidden by a spray of maiden-hair fern, which Jenny had picked for her at the last moment, nestled into the coil of gold brown hair at the back of her head; and

the exquisite unrivalled pearliness of her throat and arms, peeping from the modest veil which shrouded them seemed to positively dazzle you, and make her look more like a pure June lily than ever.

Lionel simply sat and stared at her. He ate very little dinner, and he hardly answered his cousin when she spoke to him. Adelaide was quite right when, on rising from table, she told him that he had been remarkably stupid, and that she was sorry she hadn't let poor Bertie sit by her instead. She hoped he would have found *something* to say before he came up to the drawing-room.

Now, it was a custom of Sir William's, an old-fashioned one, to sit a long time over his wine, and Lion was already groaning in spirit over the thought of it, and hoping sincerely that the yet delicate health of the Hon. Victoria might for once induce her father-in-law to curtail the after-dinner symposium. Ordinarily, I believe, the young man liked his glass of wine well enough ; sometimes the talk over it better than that with the ladies upstairs ; and if he had a congenial neighbour, was wont to tilt up the back-legs of his chair, plant his elbows squarely on the table, and fire away at a great rate at all manner of subjects, from nice questions of theology or metaphysics to glacial periods and Haeckel's theories on evolution. But where is the man who cares a fig for glacial periods when he is in a red heat of anxiety to get back to the girl he is in love with ? and how can there seem anything but the coarsest desecration in Darwinism when applied to a creature so fair and ethereal, that, instead of having been evolved upwards through cycles of ages from a miserable protozoan, she seemed to have dropped down from heaven that moment, unequalled and complete in all perfection ? If the young man had not been a clergyman he could heartily have anathematised Squire Chawler when, just as politics and vintages seemed to be talked out, and he thought a move must be in preparation, that worthy gentleman deliberately reached out his hand for the port and filled his glass for the third time, with the air of a man just commencing an evening's enjoyment. Lion felt sure at that moment that he had always hated old Chawler—coarse, red-faced, arrogant old fellow ! And as if the latter read his thoughts, and was bent on retaliation, the squire turned suddenly to him and observed in a tone of some austerity,—

‘ And so, Mr Lionel Ashleigh, your good father tells me

that you've taken up quite a different line from the rest of your family, and instead of following in the steps of your forefathers, have leagued yourself with all the d—d, Radical, demagogue, atheistical ideas of the day, and are teaching them up at Chadleigh End yonder. Eh ! what have you to say to that, sir ? To my mind it seems hardly credible.'

'Whatever my father tells you, you may pretty safely credit, squire,' Lion answered indifferently, but was interrupted by the rector,—

'Come, come, Chawler, you're overreaching the mark. I said Lion went a good length beyond my way of thinking, or what we should have thought orthodox or sound in our young days ; not but that I fear there are some, higher in the Church than he, who go even farther now-a-days.'

'A precious deal farther,' said Lionel, laughing. "'That in the dean is but a choleric word which in the curate is rank blasphemy !' You needn't be afraid, sir ; there are still those moral and mental safeguards on freedom of thought called bishops. Mine will keep me in order, depend on it.'

'The bishop ! Bah ! Much you young parsons care for bishops now-a-days !' cried the squire, reaching out a big wrinkly hand for the decanter ; 'except to use them as a sort of ecclesiastical Aunt Sally, to be dressed up and set on a little elevation for everyone who's minded to shy a stick at. I'm d—d if I know what the world's coming to now-a-days.'

'Better shy sticks at them than make them into a lot of little popes,' said Lion, jokingly. 'It's only freedom of conscience and private judgment after all, squire, and they're the first principles of our Church.'

'Freedom of flowers and frippery, sir !' bawled the squire, bringing down his empty glass with a bang on the table ; 'and private and public infidelity ! That's what you mean. Egad, I'd give something to get back the days when your Ritualists and Broad Churchmen weren't so much as heard of in respectable country parishes, and a man went up into the pulpit in a decent black gown, and was listented to a d—d sight more respectfully than your new-fangled innovators are now-a-days.'

'I'd preach in a shooting-jacket, or none at all, for the matter of that, if my people liked it or would listen to me better,' Lion answered, trying to keep his temper. 'That sort of thing may affect Hodge. It don't me ; and it's Hodge whom I'm paid to work for.'

'That is your opinion, my dear boy, and I entirely disapprove of it,' said the Rector, frowning uneasily. 'Indeed, it is irritating to me to hear a son of mine express such ideas. Every clergyman has a duty to perform far above pleasing his parishioners (the lower orders especially), which is, after all, only a secondary matter, that of upholding the dignity of his—'

'No one's performing the duty of passing the burgundy,' broke in Sir William. 'What do you say, Strathbitham—prefer claret? Lonsdale, my dear fellow, the claret jug. Empty is it? Just touch the bell for some more, will you?'

'With pleasure,' said Captain Lonsdale, who had been silently yawning for some minutes; and having risen for the required purpose, he slipped quietly behind the chairs of the other guests, and made his escape with the dexterity of the clown in a pantomime. Lionel looked after him, and groaned again in spirit. The sailor was free to go to *his* sweetheart, though he was staying in the same house with her, and could see her all day if he chose; while here was he pinned to his chair by this odious old Chawler, and forced either to knock under to him, or say things which he knew were aggravating his father. It was beyond endurance.

'What! Lonsdale sneaked?' cried Sir William, looking at the vacant place. 'That comes of being in love. Nothing ruins a good fellow so thoroughly and spoils his taste for a glass of wine as that; and I say it, though it's my own daughter that's to blame. Ah, well, well; we were all fools in that way once, I suppose. Lion, you're the only sensible man in the party—neither wooing nor wooed. Fill your glass, lad, and don't let old Chawler bully you.'

'I am not bullying him,' said the squire; 'I like Lionel Ashleigh as much as you do. Yes, young sir, I like you—wrong-headed and foolish and presumptuous as you are:—first, because you are an Ashleigh, and I like all the Ashleighs; and next, because you were a chum of my boy Tim's, at Rugby, and stood by the scamp when he had got into a scrape, as he was always doing.'

Now everyone at table knew that, scamp as Tim Chawler had been, his father's hair had turned white all in one day when the news came that the lad had fallen fighting like a young tiger in the Indian mutiny; so when the squire said that without a break in his harsh rough voice, Lion wouldn't have got up and left him if Sybil herself had been waiting outside the door; no, not though the old man went on to say,—

'And that's why I want to make you ashamed of your abominable revolutionary ideas of—'

'*Evolutionary*, you mean, don't you, squire?' put in the young curate, but was silenced.

'Evolutionary or revolutionary, it's all the same. Two words for one thing, and a d—d bad thing too.'

'In which, though in milder language'—here the Rector bent his head and coughed in assent—'I must say that I agree with Squire Chawler,' observed Lord Strathbitham, with that sort of nervous deliberateness of utterance which forces people to listen even though the matter be not worth listening to. 'I am a man of—I hope I may say, progress—yes, most decidedly of progress; but really some of the ideas freely broached at present—'

'The wages men expect!' put in John Ashleigh, speaking for the first time since politics had been done with.

'I am not alluding to wages, however,' said Lord Strathbitham, 'but to subjects touching more—I think I may say much more—yes, infinitely more, on the vital principles of morality and civilisation—'

'Oh, as to morality, I don't think building them larger cottages makes much difference to that,' said John. 'They only take in a lodger. Father, if you'll excuse me, I'll go up and see that Victoria isn't tiring herself,' and then he too took himself off. This time Lionel was not to be balked. Pretending to think it a general move, he sprang to his feet, and pushing back his chair, followed his cousin too quickly to be stopped.

Someone was singing at the piano when the two young men entered the drawing-room. Lionel hoped that it was Sybil, and that he should be able to assume the privilege of 'turning over' for her; but he was disappointed; it was Adelaide who was at the piano, while Sybil was talking to his mother, wedged into a little corner between that lady and a big table, so that there was no possibility of getting at her. He was given no temptation to try, however, for though he heard Mrs Ashleigh say, 'Ah! here's Lion at last!' Sybil never moved or looked up; and on the other hand, the Honourable Victoria lifted her cold, grey eyes and greeted him with a slight smile and motion of the head, equivalent to an invitation, or rather a royal command, to approach her. Lionel obeyed of course, as in duty bound, though with a heavy heart; but satisfied with having him at her side, Victoria had nothing to say. She liked to see a man in attendance on her. It was a sort of tribute to her state; but

she did not want him to talk to her, nor to talk to him. She observed that the gentlemen were late, and that the evening was warm. She then signified by a gesture that if he liked to fan her with a gorgeous plume made of ostrich-feathers and humming-birds lying in her lap, he might do so; and as soon as he had taken the toy in his hands she turned her cheek away and recomposed herself to listen to the music, and contemplate the whiteness of her own arms.

Lionel paid little attention to either. He had caught the words 'Miss Dysart,' spoken by Mrs Chawler. She and Lady Strathbitham were sitting just behind him; and as he mechanically waved the fan, without much regard to its efficiency, he heard her say,—

'Yes; I don't think either of them is strong. It's a pity, for with all their prettiness, and they are both nice-looking girls, to those who admire that washed-out style, I doubt if they'll marry easily. I hear that they are very poor, and their mother has brought them up with such high notions, that they won't even look at any of the middle-class young men about here; many of whom have plenty of money, and therefore don't want it in a wife as much as the younger sons in *our* class. I'm sorry for them.'

'Nay, but 'tis verra fulish o' the mother,' said Lady Strathbitham, one of the smallest and prettiest of old-fashioned Scotch gentle-women. 'For ye ken that there's mony o' the highest faimilies marry wi' money an' naught else. It wass only this present year ane o' the M'Dougals o' Auchinleve, the young marquis's ain brither, tuk to wife a Miss Higginson, whose father sold pork an' bacon in a wee shoppie in Manchester, no sae long agone. And what does she think will come o' her bairns ef she doesna' fin' them gudemen before the Lord taks hersel'?'

'Indeed, I don't know,' said Mrs Chawler, encouraged to be quite voluble by the great lady's kindly gossiping. 'They will go out as governesses, I suppose, unless their relations take pity on them; and after all, that's nothing but living on charity. If I were Sybil Dysart I would rather teach.'

'Gin the men will let her,' smiled Lady Strathbitham cheerily. 'Wi' that bonny wee face o' hers, I'd no chance it gin I had a son.'

'Oh! men will admire a pretty face without wanting to marry it,' said Mrs Chawler. 'How do you account for there being so many pretty ladylike old maids if it were otherwise?'

'Deed an I've often thocht 'twas because they had been ower gude for the men aboot them, an' that the latter kenned it. I'll just tell ye—'

But what Lionel never heard, for at that moment Adelaide left the piano, and Sybil, at someone's request, rose to take her place. The young man's emotions were all in a blaze. 'Go out governessing!' 'Live on charity!' 'Admire without wanting to marry her!' Was that how people dared to speak of his goddess? Not while he lived. Not if he knew it. Mrs Chawler should see for herself, if she liked, that one man at any-rate was not afraid to show his admiration of Sybil Dysart in the most unequivocal manner. His darling was 'ower gude' for him, and he owned it, but at least no one should say it was not her own fault if she were an old maid. Flinging down the Honourable Victoria's fan into her lap, with an abruptness which nearly startled her into a fit, and tramping heedlessly over Lady Ashleigh's velvet skirts, the careless, impetuous young fellow made but two strides forward and was at Sybil's side, almost stammering in his eager offer to find her music for her, and with so flushed and excited an air that his mother frowned and bit her lip sharply, muttering to herself that he need not make *quite* such an exposé of his feelings, while Lady Strathbitham bent her soft grey-curled little head nearer to the squire's wife, and whispered,—

'I'm thinking ye're wrong aboot ane o' the men, Mrs Chawler. Yon winsome lassie will no be a speenster long, depend on it.'

Sybil, meanwhile, quite unconscious of the stir of feeling she had excited, and looking all the fairer for her unconsciousness, was singing that prettiest of all passionate, pathetic ballads, by Elizabeth Philp, 'The Story of a Year,' in a voice so sweet and well trained, that one could as soon quarrel with its want of power or volume, as with the notes of a linnet from a hawthorn-twigs in spring; and every syllable thrilled through the man's soul behind her with a pathos and tenderness which was far beyond the stretch of her own spirit's grasp. When her voice faltered on the desperate cry to God from the broken-hearted girl in the song, it never occurred to Lionel, as it did to Adelaide, who knew her friend better, that the note was simply too high for her. To him it seemed like a real heart-throb of sympathetic sorrow; and when her notes sank on the lower cadence of the final verse—

‘And thus is all my story told,
A year—and nothing more !
I live because God keeps my life,
And holds His heaven in store—’

there were actual tears in the young man’s honest eyes, and he would have given a hundred pounds to have been able to take the slender singer then and there into his arms, and tell her that he had a story for her which would never have done being told, and that, if she would, God might hold a ‘heaven in store’ for them even on this dull mother earth. It was just as well, however, that he was unable to carry out the impulse ; for I am sure of one thing, it would have astonished no one present more than Sybil herself. Didn’t she know quite well that her story was hardly begun, and that there must be plenty of good things in store for her ? The loving fancifulness which could blend the song she had been singing with her own personality, was an idea which could not even occur to her. Jenny would have comprehended it easily enough.

‘Don’t leave off yet. Go on playing something—anything—only don’t stop so soon,’ Lion said, in a low, hurried voice, as she finished and made a movement to rise ; and Sybil, who had an inkling that Squire Chawler was waiting somewhere in the background, ready to pounce on her and make her talk to him, yielded more easily than she might otherwise have done ; and after a moment’s pause let her fingers stray as of themselves into one of the sweetest and simplest of Mendelssohn’s Lieder. The piano was not very far from the rest of the company, but it stood rather back, in a sort of alcove, and a tall stand of ferns and flowering-plants further veiled it from general view. The light from the great crystal globe of the lamp on the centre table came filtering through this leafy screen, and just touched the fold of Sybil’s white dress and rested on her rosy finger-tips, and the yellowing ivory of the worn old keys. There was a tall, red azalea, one mass of blossom, in a big, blue china jar close beside her. Some of the petals had fallen on her hair and dress, and hung there in a little rain of transparent rose-colour. Her head was bent forward, and one tiny, loose lock breaking into curl on the pretty, slender throat, glittered like a golden ring. In the room beyond there was a slight commotion. John was telling his wife she looked pale, and the elder ladies were urging her to retire. No one was looking at those two by the piano ; and, moved by an impulse which he could not resist, Lionel

suddenly but gently laid his hand on one of those small ones resting on the keys.

‘Sybil !’ he said, almost in a whisper. ‘Dear, will you listen to me for a moment ? I want to tell you something. I can’t keep it back any longer ; and—and you must have guessed it. I—’

CHAPTER IV.

WIZARDS AND DRAGONS.

It was Sybil who interrupted him. Before he could finish she had turned round, drawing away her hand as she did so, and looked up at him, the light of the lamp falling full on her innocent, wood-anemone face and calm eyes.

‘Will it not do another time ?’ she said, gently. ‘I shall be very glad then ; but I think Mrs John is going upstairs. I must say good-night to her.’ And then she rose and turned quickly, but with the soft grace peculiar to her movements, and which prevented their having any semblance of haste or abruptness, to the rest of the party.

Lion had barely time to have stopped her even if he had tried ; but, indeed, the thought of trying did not enter his head. He was not the man to hold a woman against her will, let the disinclination be shown ever so gently ; and on the present occasion he could not tell whether she had been really disinclined, or only startled by his impetuosity. The pain of being thrown back on himself, however, was none the less keen ; and his face was still pale to the very lips with it when his mother came up and spoke to him.

‘Sybil did not do Mendelssohn justice,’ she said, quietly, but with a mute anxiety in her eye which she could not control. ‘Usually I prefer her playing to her singing ; but I expect you were talking to her and disturbed her. You shouldn’t do that, dear boy, for your uncle cares so much for classical music, and you can talk to her as much as you like at Chadleigh End, you know.’

The young man looked up sharply, a quick flash in his eyes. It was the second time that had been said to him that evening ; and he was not in the most placable of moods. Only the

memory of those words : 'Another time I shall be very glad,' kept him from losing his temper altogether.

'So most people seem to think,' he answered, a decided touch of petulance in his tone, 'but it is not the fact. I haven't spoken to Sybil Dysart for I don't know how long, and I hadn't begun then, though I wanted to do so particularly. Do you know how she is going home to-night ?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Ashleigh, as quietly as before ; 'in our carriage after it has left your father and me at the Rectory. Why ?'

'Will you let it take me too, mother ? I can send over for my horse to-morrow.'

The Rector's wife hesitated. She had tacitly given her consent to a greater thing, and meant to abide by it, as Mrs Dysart had divined ; but—

'That is rather a strange request,' she said, slowly. 'Lion, do you know what it implies ? Have you thought about it ?'

'Yes,' he answered, looking her full and frankly in the face. 'But you have known it too for a long time, and I can't get a chance unless you help me. You will, won't you, mother ? I have waited so long, and I must speak to her somehow.'

'If you *must*'— said Mrs Ashleigh. Proud woman, and little demonstrative as she was, the positive realisation that the moment for giving up her only child had actually come, cost her a pang none the less cruel because it was so bravely concealed, and because her own hand was asked to help in the severing of the link which still bound her to him closer than any other. 'I do not think I am given to denying you much,' she added, with a faint smile ; 'and as I told you once before, you must use your own judgment about this. Your father and I will make no objection, though we both think you might have done better. But as to going home together, you must ask Sybil first. If she is willing— Hush ! isn't that someone asking for you ?'

It was ; and Lionel going to the door found that his own man was waiting in the hall for him with a message to say that he was wanted at home.

'That Radical tinker fellow, Joe Betts, sir. Been run over by a dray, an' took to the Haunch o' Venison. They don't think he'll make out to live till morning ; and he's asked twice for you. I had your horse saddled while I sent up to you.'

'That was right. I'll come at once,' said Lionel. It only meant another dashing of his heart's desire ; but after all it was his work, and he was paid for doing it just as much as that man

was for saddling his horse. Joe Betts might be an irreligious scamp—Lion rather thought he was—and might possibly live till morning or longer; but if he wanted the parson he had a right to have him. Love and Sybil must just wait their time till afterwards. Yet it was some consolation to think, as he set out on his long, wet ride—for it was raining fast—that Sybil's soft, little fingers did not seem to flinch from the tight grasp in which for one moment he had held them while bidding her farewell, and that there was even a gentle regret in her eyes when his mother, taking pity on his bravely-smothered disappointment, said,—

‘I’m very sorry you have to go, dear; for I meant to have sent you with Sybil to see her safe home. It would have been less lonely for her.’

‘Ah well, some other time!’ he repeated to himself, by way of consolation; ‘and then I will not trust to chance any more. I’ll have it out plainly in her own home, as a man should. Hullo! what’s that?’

He was riding at a good pace, taking his way across Chaddleigh Heath—a wide broken expanse of ground, dotted over with stunted oaks and thorns on the higher parts, and stretching away in long flats of brown turf intersected by deep ruts, and flecked here and there by clumps of gorse or shallow pools of water in fringed setting, of dark red dock and whispering reed. It was raining, as I have said, and the sky was covered with clouds—purple, black and heavy; but now and then a pale watery moon peeped between them, and cast a wan fitful glimmer of yellowish light upon the ragged upper edges of these cloud-banks and the pools of water below, only to be blotted out the next moment as a gust of wind swept a fresh rift of inky vapour across its face, and sent a sharp patter of small cold rain-drops into that of the rider. It was at such a moment as this that Lionel’s horse suddenly shied with some violence to the left, and glancing over his shoulder he saw that he had nearly ridden over a young woman who had just emerged from a small cottage standing some little way from the path, and was crossing the latter just in front of him.

This cottage was so low, so tumbledown and dilapidated, so overgrown with rank mosses, and screened by a clump of ragged fir-trees, that at first sight you might not have perceived it at all, or might have passed it by as some long-deserted dwelling; for there was no sign of smoke from the ruinous chimney, and the weeds from the patch of garden in front

grew up rank and luxuriant above the hedge, and quite concealed a faint gleam of light from a window on one side of the door. But as the clouds parted, a white streak of moonlight, piercing the decaying boughs of the fir-tree, fell upon a board nailed above the front-door, which bore in large black letters, much faded and defaced by time, the following inscription:—
'Isac Jowl, Worm Doctor, Professor of Medical Botany, Herbalist. *Herb Medicines carefully prepared. ADVICE GRATIS.*' At the same moment, a voice, husky and rasping, as of someone well stricken with years, called out from the dark entrance-way,—

'Hi ! there, young woman ! Mind you tell your friend one thing. The dose mustn't be repeated more than twice in the twelve hours. Look to that, or it'll do her harm.'

The girl had been hurrying on as if anxious to escape ; but the call arrested her, and she stopped short, throwing one apprehensive look at Lionel, as he involuntarily checked his horse, and another at the door whence the voice proceeded. Lion saw her face as she did so, a rather pretty one, that of a girl in his own parish, a nice respectable young woman, though she had a sister in service in London, about whom there were reports among the neighbours of an order the reverse of complimentary ; and the young man noticed that she looked unhappy and ashamed, as well as frightened. On the impulse of the moment he pulled up his horse outside the gate from which she had just emerged, and shouted out,—

'What, Jowl, is that you selling your poison physics at this time of night, and to servant girls as usual ! Have a care, old man, or you'll be doing yourself harm one of these days.'

'An' who be *you*, pray, to take count o' me an' my doins ?' retorted the voice from within, harsher and more raspy than ever. 'Who gave you the right to meddle wi' honest folk's affairs ? Take care you never want a dose o' physic yourself, young man, whoever ye be.'

'I am Mr Ashleigh, your clergyman,' Lion answered, perhaps the more sharply, that a fresh gust of rain was pattering against his face. 'And it's as much my business to look after you as after the other folks in my parish. If your trade were as honest as you pretend, you wouldn't object to people "taking count" of you ; but, as I told you once before, I don't believe it is, and I warn you now, I have my eye on you.'

'An' I tell you, muster parson, as I dawn't care where you have your eyes,' retorted the voice from the doorway. 'Look

to yourself, young gent, and take care o' your own doins. The day may come when you wont crow so loud as you do now. There's a love philter you'd like to be buying even to-day, I fancy, if you'd brass enow to ask for it ; but there's no philter, as 'll hold love to you, not even the love of a widow's daughter, muster parson !'

Lionel did not condescend to reply. For one thing, the sharp shutting of a door showed him that it would be useless ; and for another, he was anxious to overtake and speak to the girl, who had hurried on during the brief dialogue, and was already lost to sight. The momentary gleam of moonlight had, however, already disappeared, and the night was again as dark as Erebus. Perhaps, too, the young woman had taken a different route on purpose ; at anyrate, strain his eyes as he might, he could see no signs of her, and, indeed, reached the Haunch of Venison without encountering another human being.

It was the second day after this, a day which in its genial warmth and sunshine in no wise recalled the stormy and tempestuous evening last described, when Mrs Dysart lay on her sofa reading a letter—one which had arrived for her on the previous night, and which she had already perused twice, and was now going through for the third time. Truth to say, it was not a letter which a mother could lightly lay aside ; for it was from Lionel Ashleigh, and it asked her to give him her eldest daughter for his wife.

The drawing-room at Hillbrow was a warm sunny apartment, low-ceilinged like all the rest of the house, with a wide fireplace where pots of ferns and flowering grasses now waved their soft green plumes between the brass dogs, which in winter supported goodly billets of wood, and with three long French windows opening into a verandah paved with brown and white tiles, littered with books and work-tables, and with a sloping roof supported on rustic pillars, each one forming a spiral garland of cluster roses, white and pink, canary-creeper showered over with its myriad golden blossoms, and clematis covering the ground with a snow of milk-white petals. From this verandah the garden sloped down sharply in a succession of terraces ; and lying on her sofa Mrs Dysart could see the dark-brown slopes of Chadleigh Heath backed by dusky woods standing up like a crest against the pale-blue sky, and hear the gay voices of her girls ringing out among the rose-bushes in the garden below. A pretty sight and pleasant sound to any

woman of a contented mind, pleasanter and prettier than usual on this balmy morning with the sunlight flickering through the leaves, and a sky like a turquoise framed between those garlanded pillars ; but this woman leaning back among her sofa cushions, wrapped in a warm shawl, and shivering as if it were winter, noted none of the peaceful beauty of it ; and only by the deepened frown on her brow when Sybil's flute-like tones sounded clearer than usual from below, could it have been told that she was even conscious of what was passing about her, so fixed and abstracted was the expression of the pale, drawn face.

These mothers of ours ! what a very Gethsemane of mental suffering the blessing of childbearing brings to too many of them. All our sympathies are with the young people in general. Their loves and their sorrows are the matters of most interest to us ; and certainly at the present moment, Sybil Dysart, laughing in the sunshine with her hands full of roses, a worshipping sister at her heels, and a lover only waiting to fall at her feet, is a far brighter and more attractive object for the mind to rest on, than the pale care-lined lady listening with closed eyes and hands nervously clenched, for the knock which she herself has invited, and yet which she feels will strike like a knell upon her heart when it comes.

' Believe me, I will love and guard Sybil as my own life if you will only give her to me,' Lion had said in his letter, and Mrs Dysart believed him ; but to be obliged to give up that 'love and guarding' to anyone, even the most trusted, was a trial which perhaps none but a mother, and a mother whose devotion to her children was at once the passion and the comfort of her life, could thoroughly realise.

Only that morning Sybil had been down on her knees by her mother, trying, with coaxing and caresses, to extract permission to have her pretty ears pierced in order that she might have the glory of wearing a certain pair of diamond earrings which had been left her by her grandmother. ' Everybody else has their ears pierced now-a-days ; and it seems a shame to have only one handsome ornament and not be able to wear it. Do say Yes, there's a darling mammy,' she had pleaded with her soft cheek against her mother's, and her small hands ruffling the widow's hair after a little pet way of her own ; but Mrs Dysart had not been minded to say Yes. Her husband had not liked girls to wear earrings ; so Sybil was sent away disappointed, though sunny and sweet-tempered as usual ; and a little later her mother overheard Jenny saying,—

'Never mind, dear; I daresay when you're a married woman your husband will let you wear them, and give you others too.'

At any other time Mrs Dysart would have paid no attention to the girlish impetuous speech. She hardly did so even at the moment, but now, with Lionel's letter in her hand, and her answer to it already in his, it came back to her with a pang keen enough to bring actual tears into her eyes.

For it was true. Once married it would be no longer on her that those pretty coaxings would be lavished; no longer she who would have the power of granting or refusing her darling's petitions; but a young man who, less wise in his love, would be only too glad to say Yes to every request proffered by so winsome a speaker. As Lionel Ashleigh's wife, Sybil's mother would have no more right or possession over her than any other relative; and as her mind went back to the days when the tiny dimpled body of her first-born lay within her arms, and the soft little flossy head nestled against her breast, with that small inarticulate cry than which no music, however thrilling, can ever sound so wonderful in a mother's ears, her very heart seemed to contract, and she almost hated Lionel for the request which she would have hated him more if he had never made.

For it was her dearest desire that he should marry Sybil.

Ever since *something* which had happened long years ago in the early days of her married life, something which had been the first nail in her husband's coffin, and which had branded her soul with a sense of guilt—the letters of which no time, or grief, or penitence had ever had power to efface—she had watched over the two girls whom God had given her with a trembling morbid anxiety, as if she were striving to avert the wrath which she dreaded might be wreaked on them instead of on her who had evoked it; an anxiety which gradually became concentrated on Sybil as the latter grew in years and developed the peculiarly winsome, innocent manners and wild-rose type of beauty which had hitherto been only connected in the widow's mind with a great sense of trust betrayed and selfish cruelty; and which never rose before her mind without bringing with them a shuddering recollection of certain words spoken in that wilderness skirting the seraph-guarded wall of Eden four thousand years before.

"*Where is Abel, thy brother?*"

‘And Cain answered and said, “I know not.”’ Then said He who spoke to him,—

“*What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.*”’

Was not some such cry rising against her from the sods above a girlish grave even now? And was it not still unsatisfied and fated to remain so unless, indeed, it descended on her children? And who would protect them once she was gone? Mrs Dysart could not trust in God; her sense of His justice was too keen. She wanted something human and tangible to cling to; something strong enough to serve as a rock to shelter her child when her own strength failed; and as Lionel Ashleigh's wife, married to a man upright, kindly, and lovable in every way, with her nearest friends among her husband's family, and her wisely home within sight of her childhood's one, surely the girl would be safe. It was for this end that the mother had prayed and schemed and managed; had kept Sybil out of the way of other people, and opened her doors to Lionel; and yet, now that her prayers were granted, and her management crowned with success, she was tormenting herself, not merely with the selfish grief for her child's loss, but with a suddenly wakened dread lest she might have done unwisely after all; lest Sybil's affections were less deeply engaged than she had thought, and lest it might have been better to let her see more of the world and leave the result in God's hands.

‘Mr Lionel Ashleigh, ma'am.’

He was come, then. It was too late for regrets or misgivings; and she drew herself upright, and even tried to smile as she saw him enter; but the effort was a failure. Not even a smile would make her face look anything but white and hard; and there was an unconscious shrinking from him in it which struck painfully on Lion as he came in, and made him more nervous and uncomfortable than he was before.

Poor fellow! Mrs Dysart had always been one of his greatest friends, but in her new character of prospective mother-in-law he would rather have found himself in almost any other presence; and the unwonted sternness and frigidity of her manner tried his nerves more than she at all realised.

‘Pray don't thank me,’ she said, cutting short his expressions of gratitude. ‘I can only tell you that you may speak to—my child. I do not at all know what she may say to you. I

have never spoken to her on the subject ; but if you fancy—if you think it wise to risk it—'

Lion looked at her full ; the steady appealing glance of his brown eyes unconsciously quelling the faltering of her lips and heart.

'I fancy nothing,' he said ; 'but I would rather risk everything than not know. What I thank you for is for giving me the chance to ask her ; for I don't think you would, unless you were willing yourself to trust her to me.'

She was very fond of him, and her heart softened ; yet she kept the softening out of her voice as she answered,—

'It is her willingness which is of consequence to you. I shall never try to force my daughter's feelings in any way, and, as I said, I do not at all know whether she has even thought of you in this way as yet.'

Lion's heart sank still lower, yet he kept up his courage manfully.

'That is one reason why I love her so dearly,' he said, boldly ; 'because she is so innocent and unconscious ; not like other girls, always thinking of romance and love-making. But I do think she likes me ; and in time—if she should get to care for me in time—you won't be vexed, will you ? I may tell her that much ?' he interrupted himself to ask, with another of his frank direct looks.

'I would rather you did not use my influence,' said Mrs Dysart coldly ; but then her womanly nature prevailed, and she put out her hand to him, her eyes shining through a mist of tears.

'Forgive me, Lion, but I cannot be gracious over giving away the dearest thing I have on earth, even to you. I will tell you this, however ; I would rather it was you than any other man, and I believe—I know, that you would take care of her. There, there,' as he nearly crushed her thin, white fingers in the energy of his protestations ; 'don't say any more now, but go to her, or I shall be getting disagreeable again. You will find her in the school-room, I think ; and—and do not keep her long. I cannot bear suspense.'

And fearful lest her mood might change again, as she said, Lionel took her at her word, and went without another syllable. He felt like the young prince in a fairy tale. The dragon at the gate of the enchanted castle had been conquered ; now he had only to deal with the princess.

CHAPTER V.

'IT WAS THE TIME OF ROSES.'

SYBIL was not in the school-room when Lion entered the small, oak-panelled apartment where the girls used to 'do their lessons' when they were younger, and where the cottage piano, on which their childish fingers had strummed, still stood, and Jenny kept her books, and microscope, and other properties; but on the table in the centre of the room stood a china bowl half-full of fresh water, beside a heap of newly-cut roses, mute witnesses of her late presence; and almost in the same moment a shadow darkened the French window, and Sybil came in, her hands full of ferns and green leaves with which to dress her flowers, and a very bright blush on her face at finding a visitor waiting for her.

Truth to tell, the girl was conscious of having been rather cruel in cutting short his confidence on the evening of the Ashleighs' dinner-party. It was not her habit to be cruel to anyone in the ordinary way; she was at once too gentle and too little coquettish; but pride, and a slight touch of pique combined, had prompted the action on the occasion in question, and hardened her even against the look of pained disappointment in his face.

Should he not have told them long before of his engagement to Miss De Boonyen, if that was what he was going to talk about; or, at least, have given them some hint of his attachment to the young lady? It was not that the actual fact of the engagement shocked or grieved her; though, considering it in the abstract, she might feel some gentle wonder at poor Horatia Maude having been capable of evoking such a sentiment in one of 'their' friends. But there was something neither friendly nor loyal in Lionell's exceeding reserve on the subject. It was almost as if he felt that his engagement was an act of treachery towards those with whom he had been so intimate before; and his embarrassment and constraint that day in the wood, coupled with Jenny's really dreadful behaviour, had pointed the moral, as it were, and made it sting. It was a comfort to her to reflect that she herself had behaved exceedingly well and with very maidenly dignity on the occasion; but she was stung all the same, and she knew it. Placid as she was, the idea that other people might take up the same idea as Jenny, and say out among themselves what even her impulsive sister was too

delicately proud to put into words, brought a hot rush of colour to her cheeks. It was true that she had in a manner grown to look on Lionel as her own property, and to accept his devotion as a matter of course ; but then everyone at home and at Dilworth was more or less devoted to her, with the exception of Mrs Ashleigh and the Honourable Victoria, who were never enthusiastic over anybody ; and, therefore, it was not so much the fact of his defection as the warmth of her loyal, young sister's indignation about it which gave her a feeling of soreness and injury at her heart, and administered the first rude shock to that maidenly serenity and unconsciousness which, as her lover rightly said, were among her greatest charms.

With these thoughts in her mind, the meeting between the two young people, who had so often laughed and chatted and idled in that very room before, was somewhat constrained. They shook hands across the roses, and then Sybil said something rather hurriedly about mamma, to which Lion made haste to answer that he had seen Mrs Dysart already. He—he rather thought she was engaged. At anyrate, she had sent him to the school-room. He hoped Sybil didn't mind.

‘Of course I don't,’ Sybil said, making a great effort to answer with her usual easy gaiety ; and, womanlike, succeeding all the better for her visitor's evident agitation. ‘Only you mustn't mind my going on with my roses while I talk. They wither so dreadfully soon at this time of the year ; and that reminds me that I daresay clever people like you and Jenny could tell me why late roses always do fade so much sooner than the June ones ? I never know the reason for such things myself. I am only stupid enough to be irritated by them. Look there now !’ and she held out a great Rose de Provence in her tiny pink palm, and then dropped it, a mass of crumbling petals, with a little, petulant gesture, on the table.

Lionel looked at it and her in silence. He did not attempt to answer. In his heart he was thinking how lovely and graceful she was, how far above him or any man, and how he could possibly find words to tell her of his admiration and presumption. It may seem very ridiculous in this age of loves, light and fleeting, and in an Oxford man, but it's a fact that he had never made love to a woman before, even in jest, hardly ever a gallant speech in all his life ; and, in truth, looking was easier than speaking just now ; for the picture at which he looked was pretty enough to chain even a less partial eye.

It was, as Sybil said, very late in the year for roses ; but in

that old-fashioned garden she had managed to find some of almost every sort and shade to deck her china bowl. Creamy, full-blown roses with a fragrance of fresh-gathered apples ; roses with a delicate maiden's blush on them, and roses whiter than snow, or that same maiden in her first hour of death ; yellow roses, bell-shaped, and turning to gold-colour at the heart ; velvety, deep red roses, of so intense a hue they seemed to burn in their own soft fire ; cabbage roses, big and round and pink, and filling the room with their homely, cottage-garden sweetness, and tiny, heart-shaped buds, deeply crimson as living rubies, and set in feathery, emerald moss. All these, and a dozen others of every shape and hue, lay heaped together on the old, carved table, in a lavishness and a delicacy of colour which would have turned the soul of a Fantin sick with envious impotence to copy.

The room was lit by one long, narrow window, and the sunshine pouring in through the upper part of it fell in a slanting strip of golden light across the darkly-polished floor and brown walls, touching to even brighter colour the radiant flower-petals here and there ; and now lighting, now leaving in shadow, the slim girlish figure, in its simple gown of sea-blue linen, and the fair small head so absorbed at present over its graceful task that its owner barely looked at Lionel as she moved to and fro among her flowers ; now arranging a purely white blossom against a tuft of maple-leaves, just turned to vivid crimson by the September sun ; now softening the juxtaposition of a haughty gold-coloured Marshal Niel and a blushing Rose du Barri by nestling delicate fronds of maiden-hair and berberry-leaves, brown and glossy, between the rival beauties ; anon, throwing back the willowy curves of her slight figure, as she drew herself suddenly erect, brushing the soft flossy locks from her brow with one little hand so as to better contemplate the effect of her work. A pretty picture, indeed ! and Lionel stood and watched it in a silence too full for words ; watched it with a growing passion of love and worship which at last grew too strong for his own containing, and he suddenly came nearer, and leaning both hands on the table, that he might better look into her eyes, said,—

‘Sybil, I said the other night that I had a story to tell you. Can't you guess what it is ? My darling, I do love you so—with my whole heart ! I can't help it, even if I tried ; and I don't want to try. I want you to come to me—to be my wife. Sybil, do you think you could ? ’

I think it must have been about twenty minutes later that Sybil opened the door of the drawing-room and went in. Mrs Dysart and Jenny were sitting there, hand in hand, and my impression is that they had both been crying, while that ridiculous Jenny went first pale and then scarlet as her sister entered, and turned her eyes away with a sort of shyness; but the face of the latter, as she came towards them, was so bright and rosy, with half-bashful, half-pleased consciousness, that neither could help smiling in welcome to it, and Mrs Dysart held out her arms, saying,—

‘Well, Sybil, where is Lionel?’

‘Gone,’ said Sybil briefly; and then she knelt and nestled her pretty head into her mother’s lap. ‘I sent him away; but I think—at least, he said he would come back in the evening. O mamma! do you know it already? He loves me; and he wants me to marry him; and he says Mrs Ashleigh and the Hall people all want it too; and—and—’ with a soft little smile of tranquil satisfaction at her sister, ‘it never *was* Miss De Boonyen at all, Jenny.’

And so it was all settled; and if every love-affair could be managed as smoothly and concluded as satisfactorily to all concerned, getting married would be a far easier and pleasanter achievement than it is in the generality of cases. Usually there is nothing, I grieve to say, over which people quarrel so rabidly, and make themselves so miserable, as this same god of love; and it’s odds if there’s a single engagement, however prosaic, which has not been baptised in tears by someone or another. For even if Edwin and Angelina are blissfully content with one another (which is not always the case), the likelihood is that one or both of their papas or mammas are not, and will either object to the match altogether, or fall to loggerheads with one another over the details of it; while, should the parent birds be exceptionally amiable, there is generally to be found some rich uncle or maiden aunt to make matters unpleasant by declaiming against ‘ne’er-do-well young men,’ or ‘artful girls;’ or, worse still, there is a previous Angelina—sometimes a previous Edwin—to be got rid of, and pacified, or quarrelled with, as the case may be; a task not unfrequently of sufficient difficulty to cast a considerable chill over the new betrothal.

But in this little love idyll at Chadleigh End all seemed to go as smoothly as though the old proverb about the course of true love were for once to be disproved. ‘There were no doubts,

no hesitation, no difficulties on any side. When Lionel came in the evening he brought a note from his father to Mrs Dysart expressing his consent and approval of what had taken place ; and thereupon Sybil's mother kissed the young man and accepted him as her son, as pleasantly and affectionately as he himself could wish. Then Sybil was taken over to the Rectory, and kissed and welcomed as a daughter there : and after that Lady Ashleigh and Adelaide, always more demonstrative in their cordiality, drove over to Hillbrow themselves, and there were more kisses and more felicitations ; and Sybil's tranquil modest grace won generally encomiums, and quite made Adelaide envious ; her own happiness having been of a much more excited and irrepressible nature, and shown in a good deal of flutter and agitation, very delightful to Captain Lonsdale, but, as her aunt teased her by telling her, wanting in that repose 'which marks the class of *Vere de Vere*'.

There was not even any difficulty about money matters. The Rector, as I have said, allowed Lionel two hundred a-year in addition to his salary, and he now proposed to add another hundred to it ; and though the greater part of Mrs Dysart's income died with her, Sybil now heard that she had a small independence of her own—the Rector had been consulted about its investment long ago by her mother—something like a couple of thousand pounds, left her by her godmother, a sum which would at least suffice to dress her ; while on her mother's death she would come into half of the money for which Mrs Dysart had insured her life some time back. It was not a wealthy or brilliant match in any way ; but, at least, there would be enough for the young people to begin on, until that living fell vacant, and no bickerings with it ; for the widow's cautious diplomatising had had this good result, at anyrate, that any dissatisfaction or objections from the other side had been made, and weighed, and got over before Sybil's peace of mind had a chance of being endangered, or Lionel had in any degree compromised himself.

One condition Mrs Dysart did impose, and urged it so earnestly, with actual tears in her usually too keen eyes, that Lionel would not have had the heart to refuse it if he could. The marriage must not take place for a year. Sybil was still very young. Her twenty-first birthday would not take place till the following August. Let the mother keep her child till then, and so gradually accustom herself to the thought of losing her, a trial which would come too soon even at the latest.

'You will have her all the rest of your life,' she pleaded, her

hands clasping Lionel's in a nervous pressure which was almost painful ; ' and you are both so young, you will have such a long life even after I am dead and gone. I only ask for these few months—barely a year. Promise me to leave her here till then.'

And when Lion promised, which in the first flush of his happiness did not seem a hard thing to do, the look of thankfulness on Mrs Dysart's face, and Jenny's enthusiastic gratitude, fully repaid him for that demand on his patience.

Indeed, once this point was conceded, Mrs Dysart showed herself more amiable and indulgent than she had ever done in her life. Her real affection for Lionel being no longer held back through any fear of its impolicy, but rather enhanced by her sense of dependence on him for the care of Sybil's future happiness, she treated him as though he were her son indeed ; let him come in and out as he pleased ; consulted with him on her own plans and business affairs, as she had been wont to do with his father ; and not only allowed a much greater latitude to Sybil than she had hitherto done, but tacitly extended the same benefit to Jenny, so that many a rule, previously regarded in the light of a Russian ukase, began to be infringed, or even abrogated altogether, without notice or rebuke. And the neighbours, among whom the engagement was known almost as soon as it was made, nodded their heads wisely, and observed to one another, that now Mrs Dysart had achieved her end in securing the exclusive Mrs Ashleigh's son for her favourite daughter, she had no further object in keeping up the farce of secluding her and her sister from the sight of any other men, and meant to allow them to go about like other girls.

The fact was, however, that Lion had become such an important person to Mrs Dysart, that she hardly knew how to deny him anything he asked for ; and the young ladies, finding this out with the quickness of women, took prompt advantage of it, and used him as the medium for obtaining many a little favour, which, from long habit, they would never have ventured to ask for themselves.

' We'll make Lion ask mamma. She never says No to him,' Sybil used to say, with a little confident smile ; and Lionel was far from objecting to the task. It was a new experience for him, and a very pleasant one, to find himself suddenly enthroned as grand sultan and autocrat in a household composed of the three most charming women of his acquaintance, and he

rather liked using the power with which he had been so liberally invested ; more especially when it was at Sybil's request, and to give her pleasure.

More than once, both as boy and youth, he had gone to Mrs Dysart to beg favours for Jenny, either at the instigation of that young lady or of his own benevolence ; but in those days Jenny was his fag and *camarade* when he was at home, a very loyal and devoted *camarade*, kept under a much more severe régime than he had ever experienced : and therefore it was only good-natured to beg the poor little thing out o punishment, or coax an indulgence for her, at the risk of having his request granted or refused, as the case might be. But, *then*, Sybil seemed more independent of his services. She did not tear her clothes to pieces with climbing over a spike-guarded fence, or yearn to be taught Greek, or burn a hole in the new bedroom curtains by trying surreptitious chemical experiments. Chemical smells were to her *very* nasty, and she always ran away when Lion and Jenny were knocking their heads together over some vile compound of an explosive nature, and took refuge with a story-book, or in her garden, either of which afforded her more enjoyment. Greek she thought was only fit for men, just as French and Italian were for women ; and, considering that her exercises in those languages were always more neatly done than Jenny's, she had some grounds for sticking to her opinion ; while Lion was hardly the person to persuade mamma into letting her have a new frock, or accept an invitation to drink tea with some other little girls. All of which made it infinitely delightful to him now to find her nestling up to him when he came, with a whispered entreaty that he would get mamma to let them do this or that :—‘ Because you know what a favourite you are, Lion dear, and she always does what you please.’

One gratification the happy lover had been very early able to procure for his sweetheart.

Sybil had always had a great desire to ride. Consequently one of the few things which she envied her friend Adelaide was the pretty brown mare on which the latter used to come cantering up the long slope to Hillbrow, and which would eat lumps of sugar out of her hand, and whinny with pleasure at her approach. But Mrs Dysart could not afford to keep a horse for one daughter, let alone two ; and, even if she could, there would have been no one to ride with them, a sufficient ob-

jection of itself, had there been no other. So Sybil smothered her longing for the pleasure as one never likely to be realised, and only betrayed that it still existed by an occasional regretful word or sigh when she and Jenny were passed in their walks by a party of light-hearted equestrians.

But all this was altered now. The first big gift which Lionel insisted on being allowed to present to his betrothed was one of the prettiest park hacks of the season—gentle, but spirited, nearly thorough-bred, and only ridden for about six months by a young lady whose sudden death had occasioned its sale; and though Mrs Dysart looked grave at first, talked of extravagance, and even scolded a little, it would have required a harder heart than hers to withstand the glow of delight in Sybil's cheeks and eyes, even if the arrival of a daintily-fitting habit and hat from Mrs Ashleigh, to complete the requirements for the coveted sacrifice, had not silenced all verbal opposition.

It was a white-stone day in Lionel's life when he and his fair young betrothed took their first ride together; for, as he lifted her down from the saddle in the gloaming, Sybil, for the first time in her life, put up her lips to meet her lover's kiss, instead of turning her head aside and letting the salute fall on her cheek or the tip of her shell-like ear, after a shy little habit of hers, which was all the more tantalising because too pretty and graceful to be quarrelled with. After that, there was rarely a day that they did not ride out together; and Sybil's health and beauty seemed to profit equally by the exercise. The roses on her cheek took a still lovelier tinge, and her eyes shone with a brighter light. It was poor Jenny who used to look rather pale and wan as she stood waiting with sisterly affection at the gate in the chill of the early spring evenings, watching for their return; but then Jenny had no lover to give her horses, or take her out riding, and those long hours when Sybil was away in the saddle seemed somewhat dreary to her at times.

The lovers were out riding one afternoon in the first week in May. Lionel had been sent for to see an old parishioner of his who lived on the other side of Box Hill—a pleasant ride of something under five miles from Chadleigh End—and he proposed to Sybil to go with him.

'Not to the house,' he added, laughingly; 'for the man is a bachelor and a misogynist; but all he wants me for is to sign a paper. It won't keep me five minutes, and you might dismount and wait for me on the hill, if you don't mind, for the

short time I shall be engaged. The day is too warm and lovely for you to catch cold.'

Sybil acquiesced gladly. She never coquetted about anything, or made difficulties, as other girls so often do. Adelaide used to tease her about it, and tell her she would make a model wife ; but Sybil did not mind. It was her nature to assent to most things, and it made life very easy to her. This afternoon she was not ten minutes getting ready. The day was too lovely, at all events to be spent indoors ; and as they rode down the long hill between Leatherhead and Mickleham her spirits rose with every step, and her light laugh rang out like music on her lover's ear. Nay, as they passed a big house at the foot of the hill—a house with big cedars shading the grounds, and girls in blue serge dresses and scarlet stockings playing tennis on a sunny bit of lawn—Sybil pointed to them with her whip, and said,—

'Lawn-tennis already ! Well, it's a nice game ; but riding is far nicer. Dear Lionel, how shall I ever thank you enough for my pretty Princess ?'

Lionel laughed.

'Have a care,' he said, warningly, 'or I may be tempted to think of the old story of the grey mare and the haystack, and fancy that you only love me for Princess's sake. It's a shame to say that, though, even in joke, my darling, for you don't entertain such selfish feelings ; do you ? Say No to please me.'

But Sybil's only answer was a laugh. She was in one of her brightest moods, airy and sunshiny as the day, and not to be trapped into protestations : like the day, too, in the crisp waves of her sunny hair and the azure brightness of her eyes, the mingled freshness and delicacy of her whole appearance. It was little wonder that Lionel, though a lover of eight months' standing, thought—ay, and the thought came back to him long afterwards—that he had never seen her look so perfectly fair and radiant as at that moment ; or that, as they passed the well-known wayside inn at Burford Bridge, where the London coach had just drawn up for refreshment, every man on the roof turned his head to gaze at her ; one gentleman in particular—a tall, handsome man in a light overcoat—leaning forward and shading his eyes with his hand as he looked after her with a marked admiration, which provoked some chaff from his companions. It brought a decided frown to Lionel's brow. The proud young sultan did not approve of other eyes staring over boldly at his queen, and he made his horse quicken its pace, so

that he might take her out of sight more speedily ; but Sybil herself was quite unconscious of the liberty that had caused her lover so much annoyance. She was far too well-bred to look at a coach-load of men under any circumstances, and could not think why her lover's face wore so grim an expression for a minute ; or why, when they reached the sheltered nook on the slope of the hill, where she was to wait for him, he looked so anxiously to right and left of them, and asked her if she was sure she did not mind being left : reiterating his assurances that he would not be ten minutes gone.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE EDGE OF THE WOOD.

LION helped Sybil to dismount, and tethered the mare by her reins to a branch of a tree before he rode off to the house whither he was bound. The chimneys of it were just visible from where they stood, peeping above a clump of beech-trees in the valley. Lion turned in his saddle and pointed them out to his betrothed with a smile.

'If it were not for those trees I should be able to see my darling from old Witherstone's library ; but at least she can see the roof that covers me. I sha'n't be a minute, love.'

'You said *ten* when you first mentioned the time,' Sybil answered, demurely, 'so perhaps if you delay any longer, your absence may shorten itself so much that you needn't go at all ! Don't be absurd, Lion.'

'Is it absurd not to like to be away from you ?' he said, bending down that he might look into her eyes. They met his, full of laughter.

'Yes, it is, for one minute, or even ten. Do you think I couldn't be happy by myself for the whole of such a lovely May day as this ? Be off, you foolish fellow !'

And thus abjured Lion did take himself off. Decidedly he was more in love just then than Sybil ; but then sultans are of reputation amorous and inclined to the reception of amorous flatteries ; whereas Sybil never flattered anybody, and cared so little for it herself that she could not even understand how she disappointed her exacting lover at times, or what it was that he

expected from her. Of course it was very nice to be with Lion. Dear, old fellow, he was always so kind and pleasant it couldn't be otherwise, and even if he sometimes talked over her head, and wanted her to take an interest in things, the very names of which had no meaning for her—well, it wasn't often ; and so long as she had her embroidery she didn't mind much. People can't expect you to give very intelligent answers when you are at work ; and, besides, he always recollected himself very soon, and either turned to Jenny with his unfinished argument, or begged his sweetheart's pardon for boring her, and changed the conversation altogether. Sybil was not bored, however. She might have been, if she had strained her mind to try and follow him ; but she was not so foolish ; and, having simply contented herself with the thought that Lion was very clever, and that it was a good thing to have a clever husband, for it made people look up to you, she went on counting her stitches and blending her shades, and was quite ready to receive his apologies with so sweet a smile that Lion felt more in love with her than ever.

As to fretting because he was absent for a few minutes more or less— Well, she had a very settled idea that a lover or husband with nothing to do but dance attendance on you, and perpetually in the same house, would be rather a severe tax on any woman's patience and affection, and she owned as much to Jenny when that young lady, who had ideal notions on the subject, was discoursing on the delightfulness of her sister's not being about to marry a 'city man,' who would be away from her all day, like most of the husbands in their neighbourhood.

'Don't even poets say that "absence makes the heart grow fonder ?" And I do think they're right,' Sybil said. 'Men are very well in their way, Jenny, but they're dreadfully interrupting.'

To-day, when Lion had departed, Sybil did not even remain seated for many moments on the tree-stump where he had placed her to rest and wait for him. The ride had been too short to tire her, even if the air had not been too fresh and invigorating to allow of the feeling, and then it was such a delicious day, such an exquisite play of sun and shade over the whole landscape, and in among the trees of the wood at her back such shafts of golden light piercing the pale emerald of the foliage, and showing a myriad delicate spring blossoms dappling the brown, leaf-strewn ground everywhere with white and purple colour. She was off her perch in a moment and among them, filling her hands with orchids, violets, and wood-

anemones, her hat and whip thrown aside, her habit tucked up through the pocket-hole ; and even Princess forgotten in the loveliness of the bouquet she was collecting, until the chance view of some small foals feeding near their mothers in a field just under the slope of the hill, smote on her conscience with the remembrance that she had not even given her favourite a farewell pat, or a bunch of grass, before leaving her, and her hands being full, she turned back to supply the omission.

It was not to be so easily done, however. When she got back to the spot where Lion had left her, the mare had disappeared. She could see no sign of her anywhere !

There was the tree, and the branch to which her lover had attached the reins still intact, and with the ground a good deal trampled beneath them ; but either the fastenings had been insecure, or someone had unloosed them. The animal was gone at anyrate, and, what was worse, she could see no trace of her either along the path by which they had come, or in the wood which covered the hillside above it.

Greatly annoyed and distressed, fearing that Lion's gift had been stolen, and blaming her own carelessness, Sybil ran along the road for some distance, retracing her steps afterwards as far in the opposite direction, and looking to right and left for any sign of her missing property, but without avail—Princess was nowhere in view, neither could she see anybody of whom to make inquiries ; for the path itself was an unfrequented one, and they had not happened to meet a living soul since they left the highroad. She was just returning to the spot where she had been left, hot and breathless, her cheeks flushed and her eyes clouded with disappointment, when as she came to an angle in the steep bank under which the way ran, her ears caught the welcome sound of horse's feet approaching, and hurrying round it, she came face to face with her truant steed ; not however alone, but led by a gentleman, a tall, well-dressed man and a stranger, but wearing an indefinitely familiar air in her eyes, which even in the first glance made her think she had seen him somewhere before. She had no time, however, just then to think where ; her mind was too much absorbed in the delight of recovering her favourite, and indeed the pretty creature seemed to share it, whinnying, tossing her glossy head, and stamping her small feet, exactly like a wilful child detected and brought back from some forbidden pleasure by a person whose authority it declines to recognise.

‘This is your property, I presume,’ said the gentleman, speak-

ing first, and smiling a little in answer to Sybil's manifest start of pleasure and surprise. 'I met it some little way off, yonder among the trees there ; and was afraid for a moment that there had been an accident. I hope most sincerely I was wrong. You have not been thrown ?'

'Oh, no, thank you very much. I was off. I had dismounted,' Sybil answered, too glad even to feel shy, and commencing to pat Princess's neck affectionately. 'I am very—'

'Much obliged to you,' she was going to add, but in saying it she had turned her eyes from the mare to its captor, and a sudden change and flush came over her face, making her break off abruptly in her sentence. Yes, she *had* seen him before ! She knew him perfectly well now : the man who had nearly shot her from behind the hedge in Farmer Dyson's turnip-field, the prototype of her mother's cameo ; Gareth knew her too.

'We have met before, I think,' he said, smiling with an undisguised pleasure, which had, however, less surprise in it than hers, seeing that he had been in a way prepared for the meeting by the glimpse he had of her from the top of the coach outside the Burford Bridge hostelry some twenty minutes before. 'I am glad to have been of some service to you this time ; for I hope it will make you forgive the unfortunate character of our last rencontre. You had not forgotten it, I see,' and there was an implied reproach both in his tone and in the glance of those dangerous deep-blue eyes which brightened the roses in Sybil's cheeks. No, she had certainly not forgotten. Seeing him again to-day it did not seem likely that anyone could. Her voice faltered a little when she answered him.

'Indeed, I had nothing to forgive then. It was my own fault that I was even frightened, and I am sure you were very sorry : unnecessarily so.'

'Hardly that. I should think anyone but a brute beast would feel it necessary to be sorry for having frightened you, even accidentally. I was only thankful that it was not worse—that I had not hurt you.'

'But you had not. I wasn't touched. It was only my hat.'

'So you told me ; but it was a terribly narrow shave, and you were awfully frightened. I remember I felt very like shooting myself for it. As it was, I went back to London next day and never fired another shot all the autumn.'

'Oh, but I am sorry,' said Sybil, very simply. 'It was not worth that. If you had hurt me indeed—'

'I should never have fired a shot again, and shouldn't have

been here pleasuring to-day. May I ask how your present accident occurred? You are not alone, surely?' and Gareth glanced curiously about him. He was wondering what had become of the attendant cavalier. Perhaps that gentleman too was looking for the runaway steed. If so, long might he look, and not return to spoil this really charming little adventure! Sybil, however, explained the case quite frankly. She was out riding with a friend who had left her to make a call at that house in the valley, and while gathering wild-flowers her horse had managed to loose its bridle and escape. Somehow her timidity with this stranger was passing away. Perhaps it was the mingling of earnestness and easy self-possession in Gareth's own manner; perhaps the exceptional circumstances of their last meeting. Anyhow, she found herself speaking to him as if they were acquaintances of long standing, and he answered her in the same tone.

'Yes, I tracked you by your flowers. Indeed, I began to think from the traces of her footsteps, that it was the Goddess of Spring who had passed along the road,' and he showed her, smiling, a dozen flowers or more, pale dog-violets and rosy frail-stemmed wood anemones, scattered unconsciously by Sybil in her hasty running to and fro in search of the Princess, which he had picked up and now held carefully in his hand.

Sybil blushed deeply, and made a little motion with hers as if to retake them. They were certainly her property. She had their fellows still tucked between the buttons of her riding-habit; but Gareth would not see her intention. That vivid blush had made her lovelier than ever; as he looked from the sweet confused face to the cluster of delicate spring blossoms nestled on her bosom, and rising and falling with every breath, he would not have given back his treasure-trove for thrice their weight in gold. In his heart he was exulting in the fate which had a second time sent this dainty creature across his path. Something surely must come of it. At anyrate he was determined not to lose sight of her again, even if he had to haunt this neighbourhood for the rest of his natural life. How exquisite she was with her delicate wild-flower beauty, and that delicious manner, so sweetly blended of simplicity and grace! How perfectly the close-fitting riding-habit set off her slender swaying figure! Why, he had never seen a girl to rival her anywhere. He envied the very breeze which kissed her fair smooth brow, and the sunshine which threw its wanton arms about her and flung her flickering shadow upon the emerald grass. Beauty

of any sort had always an intoxicating effect on Gareth Vane. He would have dropped his last half-crown into the hand of a velvety-eyed Italian beggar-girl, while he turned with a shiver of repulsion from her gaunt, baby-laden, battered-looking British sister ; would have gone on the outside of an omnibus 'to oblige' a pretty servant-maid, and declined a lift in the barouche of an ugly duchess ; and to-day the beauty of the girl, combined with that of the May morning, the pure, cool air and dazzling sunshine, the flicker of pale-green leaf and vault of turquoise sky, the wealth of wild-flowers in that bosky wood at their back and those long sunlit slopes falling away beneath them, green, close-cropped grass dotted over with juniper-bushes, and below, meadow-land, and grove, and hamlet, Betchworth Beeches looking in the distance like a rich green wreath tipped with gold-dust, the spire of Brockham Church, and a haze of pale-blue mist over distant Dorking : all the freshness, and softness, and verdure of a Surrey landscape in spring seemed to thrill and dazzle his senses, and carry him away in spite of himself. Give up those flowers ! No, not for all the pleading in those sweet forget-me-not eyes. What he would have liked would have been for *her* to give them to him ; but something in the unquestionable purity and ladyhood of the girl's whole mien withheld him, bold as he was, from asking them of her. He contented himself with the lesser audacity of affecting not to know that she wanted them, and continued to hold them in one hand while he kept the other on the mare's bridle, and walked by her side back to the place where she had been left.

Sybil stopped suddenly and turned towards him as they came up to it. The idea had suddenly occurred to her that Lion might have returned ; and what would he think of seeing her approaching him *tête-à-tête* with a total stranger ? Would it not seem very odd to him ? And though her first glance showed her that he was not there, there was some nervousness in her manner as she said, holding out her hand for the reins :

'This is where I was to wait for my friend ; so I will not take you any farther. Thank you for the trouble you have been to already for me.'

'Don't call it trouble,' said Gareth, with a good deal more earnestness than the occasion required. 'It has, on the contrary, been a great pleasure. Will you not give me a further one and let me hold your horse for you while you wait ? I am in no hurry, and she—might escape you again. Please let me.'

'Oh no ; she will not do that. Thank you very much, but

I would rather not.' His earnestness had affected her also, only in the wrong direction, and she was getting shy and fluttered. He saw that she wanted him to go, and he had too much tact to persist in remaining; yet he made the promptness of his obedience a plea for something further.

'If you would really rather not—' he said, giving her the reins at once; yet with an evident disappointment which made Sybil feel that she had been too brusque and churlish. 'But can I do nothing else for you? I don't mean to be intrusive; pray don't think me so; but I am on a visit to some friends in this neighbourhood—the Jacobsons of Birchwood, you may know them—and if we should meet again I hope our two encounters will incline you not to look on me as an absolute stranger.'

'Indeed, I am too much obliged to you,' Sybil said, rather hesitatingly. She was quite sure that she ought to send him away now; that mamma would be shocked if she could see her standing there talking of future meetings to a young man of whose very name or standing she was utterly ignorant.

'I do know Mrs Jacobson slightly,' she said, very shyly, and wondering if she was doing wrong in making the admission, yet unable to withhold it with those beseeching eyes looking straight into hers. The next moment she felt sure she had been wrong by the saucy, joyous flash which illuminated them.

'You do? Then I shall see you again, and may ask for an introduction. I'm so glad. That will make saying good-bye pleasanter,' and he took off his hat and looked as if he would greatly like to shake hands. Sybil could not see this however. She felt as if she had transgressed already, and counted her foolish blushes as part of her offence, but to Gareth they were simply delicious. 'I shall have those little hands in mine yet; both of them,' he said to himself as he turned away. If she had given him them then, however, he would have cared little for their after touch. That is the way with men; some men, at any rate.

Sybil did not know this however. He was gone at last, and she remained seated on the tree-stump, one hand holding Princess's rein, the other idly toying with the flowers in her dress. She did not look after Gareth. She was not looking at the flowers; yet she knew, without having lifted her eyes, that when he left her their fellow blossoms were carefully fastened into his button-hole; and she hardly dared to raise her head now that she was alone, lest her hot cheeks should

by their guilty colour betray their knowledge. Yet it was not her fault. The flowers were on the ground. He had taken them thence. By asking him for them she would have seemed to attach an undue importance to the fact, an importance which to her delicate feminine mind savoured of forwardness and bad taste. She would rather that he had let them lie; or at any rate that he had not drawn her attention to them; but she could not dislike him for doing the contrary. There was an impulsive frankness and fire about his whole manner of speech which made his looks and words seem like the natural expressions of feeling in a warm, unchecked nature. Sybil's nature, mild as it was, had been checked and controlled ever since her birth. This glimpse of one so opposite frightened her a little, but it fascinated her as well. She could not help retaining it in her mind.

Lion had been absent nearer twenty than ten minutes when he again came in sight of his betrothed. The paper he had had to sign was a legal one involving a good deal of discussion on the subject of land tenure, and true to tell, young Ashleigh was too much interested in that question not to throw himself into the argument with a heat and vehemence which rendered him wholly oblivious of the swift passage of time. When he did remember himself he was so horrified at the length of his delay that he scrawled his name all in a hurry, jumped on his horse, and rode off full of contrition and anxiety lest Sybil should have been vexed or wearied by her long waiting.

He need not have distressed himself. She was not looking out for him, at all events. He could see the grassy opening on the edge of the wood almost as soon as he left his friend's gate, and was glad to be able to descry Sybil's slender black figure, with the mare standing close by her, just as he had left them. Her head was bent forward, however, and she sat so motionless that he almost thought she was asleep; more especially as when he whistled cheerily to her she did not look round, and started violently as he drew up at her side, gazing at him with eyes as round and bewildered as though he were the last person she expected to see.

'Why, Sybil,' he said, half laughing, 'did I startle you? I do believe you were so tired of waiting you had fallen asleep! You poor child, are you very angry with me?' and he dismounted, taking her hands and lifting her up with very contrite tenderness. 'Indeed, I never meant to be so long.'

'Were you long? I—I didn't know,' said Sybil. Her eyes

still had that bewildered look, and her cheeks were very pink ; yet she did not seem exactly vexed. ' You said ten minutes.'

' And I've been gone nearly half-an-hour ; more shame to me ! But I had no idea what Witherstone wanted me to sign till I saw the papers, and really the infamous unfairness of the— But are you very tired, dear ? You haven't been sitting here all the time, have you ? Your hands feel nice and warm, pressing them kindly before he dropped them to lift her into the saddle. ' Hullo, though ! What's the matter with the pommel on this side ? The leather is all scraped off.'

' Scrapped, is it ? I didn't see,' Sybil answered, vaguely, then recollecting herself with an effort ; ' Princess got away. She may have rubbed it against a tree. I am sorry.'

Lion looked at her quickly. The change in her tone since he had left her began to strike him painfully, and he thought she was really annoyed.

' So am I,' he said, heartily. ' Got away, did she ? That was my fault. I must have fastened her up carelessly. And had you to run after her ? I hope not. My poor little sweet-heart, you'd be right to give me a scolding, for I'm sure I deserve it. I wish now that I hadn't left you at all.'

' Oh no,' said Sybil, with a faint smile, ' don't say that. I did not run far. She—she was caught for me ; and I never mind being left. I am not at all tired.'

She smiled again as she said it. In truth, she had never felt less tired, and only wished Lion would leave off apologising for a delay which she had not felt. Usually the young princess of Hillbrow did not object to apologies if anyone neglected her, and accepted them graciously as her due ; but to-day they teased her, and gave her an uncomfortable sensation. The fact was she was trying to think whether she should tell her lover of her little adventure or not. It would have been most natural to do so. Indeed, when she said the mare had been caught for her, she meant to go on and narrate by whom ; but a curious disinclination to enter on the long story which it seemed to involve withheld her and sealed her lips. She had never happened to mention the incident of last September to her *fiancé* ; and to do so now would seem to impart a romantic character to her second meeting with the hero of it, from which she shrank with a half-unconscious repugnance, which she could not have explained even to herself. Besides, Lion was so particular, almost as bad in that way as mamma herself ; he might think the man impertinent for talking to her

at all ; and certainly if she were to repeat his actual words they might have that sound. Then there were the flowers too. Oh, she couldn't tell Lion all those foolish things ; yet without them there would be no story at all. Perhaps it would be better to say nothing about it. After all there was little likelihood of her seeing any more of him ; for Mrs Jacobson was a very gay young woman, not at all in the Ashleighs' set. She had only met her once or twice herself, and this stranger was but on a visit.

Thinking all these things she hardly heard what Lion said, and rode homeward in such a silent, abstracted mood, so different from that in which she had come out, that at last, finding that she did not listen to him, he ceased abruptly in his efforts to talk to her. She was not even conscious of it.

'I wish Jenny had been with her,' he said to himself with an effort, which a less really good-tempered man might not have made, against taking offence on his side. 'I won't take her out again when I am on parish business ; it is dull for her. I must make Jenny tell me afterwards if she was really angry or tired. She is sure to know.'

There was something *he* didn't know, namely, that in lifting Sybil to the ground he had knocked the little bouquet out of her dress and set his foot on it ; but Sybil did, and reddened vividly. She did not say a word, but somehow the thought of those other flowers gathered up from the ground and cherished so carefully by Gareth, came before her with a sharp sense of contrast. As she went to bed that night she found herself wondering whether he had them still.

Book II.

CHAPTER I.

IN CHADLEIGH CHURCH.

THE Jacobsons of Birchwood, or rather Mrs Jacobson, her governess (a pale young woman of seven-and-twenty), and a very ugly small daughter of seven, were at lunch when Gareth

arrived ; and a perfect volley of exclamations greeted him from his hostess as he entered the dining-room : also an ecstatic clapping of hands from the ugly little daughter, and a blush from the governess. Gareth Vane very seldom did enter a room full of women and children without exciting these latter manifestations from some among them ; so he merely repaid them by a smile, which adult and juvenile appeared to consider as sufficient, and went forward to take the two very much be-jewelled hands which Mrs Jacobson tendered him with gracious *empressement*.

‘So you have come after all ! Well, I had quite given you up, and was just abusing you finely. Wasn’t I, Miss Saunders ? I said you were a perfidious wretch, and so you were ; for you promised to come down by the twelve-thirty train, in time for lunch, and to go with me to the Epsom sports ; and I sent to the station to meet you. No, you needn’t look miserable about that ; I was expecting some fish as well, and it *did* come ; but Vicky here was in despair at your breaking your word. How did you arrive after all, and what kept you ? The salmon cutlets are all cold, and there is nothing fit to eat on the table ; but it’s so delightful to see you, I’ll have something up in a moment. Sit down, do. Are you very tired ?’

‘I am not tired at all, and I don’t want anything up, and there’s nothing I love more in the world than cold salmon cutlets,’ said Gareth, dropping into a chair beside Vicky and chucking that small damsel under the chin. ‘Also, my dear Mrs Jacobson, I didn’t break my word. I came by the coach, and am prepared to escort you to the sports whenever you like to put on your bonnet ; so please don’t abuse me any more or call me bad names. I want you to tell me something instead.’

‘What is it ? You look quite excited.’

‘I am excited. I have just met an angel, and I want to know her name.’

‘Her name—an *angel* !’

‘Yes, even angels have names in the heavenly spheres. Milton says so at least ; and I suppose when they come below they bring them with them. This angel was on horseback—no ! I do not mean anything to eat ; though she was delicious enough in outward appearance to whet a stoic’s appetite—a divinity on a bay mare, the latter a tolerably neat animal with one white stocking. If you can’t tell me who she is, I shall go forth and hang myself as soon as ever the sports are over and I have given you into Matt’s care.’

‘How like you ! Some woman, of course, and before you have been in the parish five minutes !’ laughed Mrs Jacobson. ‘Thank you at any rate for postponing suicide until my master’s arrival. I appreciate the civility. Isn’t he incorrigible, Miss Saunders?’

Miss Saunders, looking a little paler than before, smiled faintly in answer. Perhaps at some period of his intimacy with the Jacobsons (and he had known them some time, Matt the husband being a stockbroker in the City, and having assisted at selling out some of his few hundreds on more than one occasion), Gareth had turned a not ungentle eye on the slim, interesting-looking governess, and had spoken a soft word or two for her comfort. Oppressed governesses, when pretty, always found a champion in this reprobate brother of Mrs Hamilton ; and though Miss Saunders was not at all oppressed, she had certainly been pretty once, and he may not have stood strictly on the bond as to her claim to notice. Now she was hardly pretty at all ; and therefore, though she remembered the soft words, he had forgotten them. Even the sweetness of his smile came by nature, not intent, and was diffused equally over governess, child, and luncheon-table. He did not even hear Mrs Jacobson’s appeal to her as he answered :—‘A woman ? Well, I suppose so. She was in woman’s form anyhow. My dear friend, you must know her ; for she lives somewhere in this neighbourhood, and she knows you. She told me so.’

‘Told you so ! When ?’

‘Just now, when I was walking by her side under Box Hill.’

‘Walking with her when you don’t even know her name ! Very improper, indeed ! and I am quite sure she was telling you a fib. I have no young lady acquaintances who ride about alone on bay mares, or ramble over Box Hill with fast young men. Don’t tell me any more about her.’

‘I won’t if you’ll tell me something instead. Let me set you right on two points however,’ and there was a little touch of earnestness superadded to the languid gaiety of Gareth’s tone, which showed he meant what he said. ‘She was not riding alone, and she did not wander over the hill with me ; and I am very sure she was not improper in any way, even by communication with my fastness.’

‘Now he is offended. Miss Saunders, this is a case !’ cried Mrs Jacobson, laughing more gaily still. ‘What did she do then, and how did you come across her ?’

‘She had dismounted to gather wild flowers, and her horse bolted. I happened to be near, having missed the right turning on my way here, and caught the brute for her. She allowed me to lead it back to the place where her companion (a parson by his rig) had left her, and then dismissed me. *Viola tout!*’

‘Dismissed you with some of the flowers by way of thank-offering !’ said Mrs Jacobson, glancing at Gareth’s bouquet ; then without waiting for him to deny the imputation, if he had been going to do so ; ‘a girl riding with a clergyman—brown horse with one white stocking ! Why, it must be—Was she fair, rather pretty, with blue eyes ?’

‘She was fair certainly ; a skin much like that Parian vase of yours when you put a lamp in it ; light hair ; not your fashionable gold or red, but a warm, pale brown, with a glitter of gold when the sun touched it ; and the bluest eyes I ever saw. As to ‘rather pretty,’ well, yes, I daresay a *woman* would call her so. That’s a matter of opinion however.’

Mrs Jacobson did not see the innuendo.

‘Well, I daresay you wouldn’t admire her,’ she said, ‘for she is not in your style : not, at least, if she is the girl I think ; and I am pretty sure of it. Fair, blue eyes, and riding with a clergyman. Oh yes ! you know her, Miss Saunders ? Miss—’

‘Dysart,’ said Miss Saunders, speaking for the first time, and in the tone of one who thought all this fuss about another woman very absurd.

‘Exactly. She’s a Miss Dysart. There are two of them ; but I only know the eldest, and they live with their mother somewhere between Epsom and Chadleigh End, a house overlooking the park.’

‘Ah, indeed ! Close to where I met her the first time then !’ cried Gareth, and felt annoyed directly afterwards ; for his hostess clapped her hands like Vicky.

‘Oh then this is not the first meeting ? Take care, Mr Gareth, or you will have young Ashleigh down on you. I am beginning to be sorry I asked you here.’

‘That is impolite, so I won’t believe it. Who, pray, is young Ashleigh ?’

‘Her lover, the curate of Chadleigh End. I didn’t see them, of course ; but it must have been he who was out with her. They ride about everywhere together ; and Mrs De Boonyen told me he gave her that horse. Oh, I believe he’s very well-to-do, a son of the rector of Dilworth and nephew of Sir William Ashleigh. They are county people, you know, quite swells ;

and people say that Miss Dysart's mamma strained heaven and earth to make up the match.'

'I should hardly think it was necessary, unless the young man was made of stone. The Dysarts are not "swells," or well-to-do, however, I suppose?'

'Oh no ; poor as rats the De Boonyens say, but proud to an extent. I'm quite complimented at Miss Dysart claiming my acquaintance, for they hold themselves so aloof in general that they will hardly know anybody.'

'Evidently that rule has exceptions, for she certainly said she knew *you*,' Gareth put in, as a conciliatory stroke. 'And now tell me about these sports. What are they? Matt only said I was to be sure to get down in time for them, and that he would meet us there in the evening.'

For Gareth had said and learnt as much as he cared to do for the present on the subject of Sybil Dysart, and he therefore changed the conversation and kept it in entirely different channels for the rest of the afternoon, only taking pains to make himself more than usually agreeable to his hostess.

'How wickedly fascinating those hats make some people look! I wonder Matt doesn't keep you in a cage for safety; I should,' he said to her on their way to the sports; and Mrs Jacobson laughed and bridled, and told him he was a very impudent fellow, and was as pleased as possible. She was just the woman to like these coarse compliments, and he knew it and dosed her with them. A woman young, good-looking, of the large-nosed, full-lipped, Judaic type—more than half a Jewess, indeed, and less than three-quarters a lady, if one may use that word in the old sense, now that every tawdry little shop-girl is a 'young lady'—Gareth knew that by a little love-making and a good deal of flattery he could twist her round his finger, and bided his time accordingly. It was only when they were driving home through the dusk of a May twilight, and had nearly reached Chadleigh End, that he took occasion to ask her in the most careless tone he could assume,—

'By the way, isn't it somewhere about here that you said my fair equestrian lives?'

To his great delight Mrs Jacobson not only nodded, but pointed to a house not far off.

'Yes, that's the place, behind the laurel-hedge on the right. I daresay young Ashleigh is doing his spooning there at present.'

Gareth mentally cursed young Ashleigh. He had no particular reason for doing so, seeing that the latter had done him

no harm, and that he did not even know him by sight ; but he cursed him all the same, and with an inward heartiness which gave him courage to say aloud,—

‘If he’s a man of taste he probably is. I shouldn’t mind doing the same. But I don’t think he’s a man of taste, or he wouldn’t have left that sweet little creature to pick wild-flowers by herself this morning. My dear Mrs Jacobson, here’s something to amuse us. Let us cut him out.’

‘*Us!*’ said Mrs Jacobson, laughing. ‘Gareth Vane, don’t talk nonsense.’

‘I’m not talking nonsense ; I mean it. It is too early for grouse ; but the game laws don’t apply to all sport. I want to know that little beauty better, and as you tell me she is engaged, the luxury will be a safe one on both sides. Won’t you help me ? Take me to call there.’

‘The idea ! Why, I don’t call there myself. I’ve never even seen the mother, and they tell me she is an iceberg.’

‘But Miss Dysart said she knew you.’

‘Yes ; I’ve met her two or three times at archery fêtes and friends’ houses, and I know young Ashleigh. I met them once just at my own gate in an awful storm, and made them come in out of it ; but that was six months ago. I couldn’t call now on the strength of it even to oblige you.’

‘Then we must manage it some other way. When you make difficulties you of course inspire one to overcome them. Where preacheth this clerical lover ?’

‘In Chadleigh Church, of course. Where else ?’

‘And of course the “lily maid” goes to hear him. My friend, we will attend Chadleigh Church next Sunday. I have not patronised the Establishment since I acted as groomsman to an old love six months ago, and she burst out crying when I kissed her.’

‘You ought to be ashamed to say so.’

‘*Au contraire* ; it was bridal privilege, and everyone else had taken it. Besides, the shame was on her side, and the tears probably of repentance. It was she who jilted me ; not I her.’

‘A likely story that,’ muttered Matt Jacobson, who was driving.

‘True, nevertheless. All the same the dampness and mouldiness of the sacred edifice on that occasion, not to mention the tears, gave me a cold, and I have not risked a second one since. Let me do so in your company on Sunday. Perhaps the warmth of your devotion may negative the ecclesiastical draughtiness.’

‘And you pretended not to think Sybil Dysart pretty ?’ said

Mrs Jacobson. 'What a shameless humbug you are! Well, it's a beautiful little church and a nice drive, so you shall be spoilt for once. Remember, though, if the mother is there I sha'n't dream of introducing you to your inamorata. I've no fancy for being snubbed because a dowdy old woman happens to be niece to an earl.'

Mrs Dysart very seldom did go to church. As she told Lionel's mother on one occasion, her health did not permit her to do so. She might have added, with equal truth, that young men's sermons (even those of her son-in-law elect) bored far more than they interested her, and that of Lion's ideas in particular she had full and plentiful feasts, served out without grudge or parsimony, in the seclusion of her own parlour; but with Sybil and Jenny it was quite otherwise; and, as Gareth rightly opined, it must have been a weighty circumstance which would have kept the girls from their weekly attendance at a church, which was not only endeared to them by being their own, but as having for its pastor the future husband of one and the adopted brother of the other. Perhaps there was nothing that Jenny found much more enjoyable in her somewhat uneventful life than Lion's sermons. So often they turned on something the two had already discussed or argued over; and though in that case the argument was often renewed later, and fought out with such irreverent heat by this independent-minded young lady, that Sybil's more submissive spirit was quite scandalised, Lion was always sure at anyrate of his young antagonist's full and eager attention: the great, bright eyes meeting his at every point with quick appreciation; while sometimes on the other hand Sybil's snowy lids drooped over hers lower than even the meekness of devotion required; and, but for the mortification of admitting such an idea, he might have almost fancied she was asleep.

On the Sunday following Princess's escapade, the two fair faces were visible as usual in their accustomed pew, wearing more than their usual likeness to one another, because subdued by a common spirit of devotion and recollection, and more than their usual unlikeness to the rest of the gay, not to say overdressed, little congregation of Chadleigh End, by the Puritan simplicity of their plain, close-fitting, grey dresses and bonnets, the only finery about them a little, black-lace scarf knotted round either throat, with a white rosebud nestled into it. The lace was of real Chantilly, and very fine. The rosebuds were real too, and freshly gathered; but I doubt whether Mrs Dysart

would have permitted the latter adornment if Sybil had not cunningly secured Lion's admiration for it first, and ordered Jenny to don one also, that the mother's indulgence might find a double claimant.

Jenny obeyed cheerfully. She would have donned a rose or a domino with equal willingness to please her sister, and thought no more about it afterwards. She never gave a remembrance to the flower once she had passed through the church door. The fragrance of it only blended with the notes of the organ (a better one than is generally found in village churches) to lift her senses into a higher and more ideal sphere ; but Sybil was not above a little innocent girlish vanity in such matters, and could not help a gentle feeling of satisfaction every time she felt the cool touch of the petals against her skin. She knew the blossom was no whiter than that soft white chin above it ; Lion had told her so, and as she raised her eyes to his during the sermon, she wondered if the thought were still in his mind.

It was not. I do not mean any disparagement to his ardour as a lover ; for the young curate was well aware of the presence of his betrothed, and perhaps preached all the better for an occasional glance at the fair, pure face ; but she might have worn a bearskin or a yashmak without his being in any way cognisant of it. He would have liked her just as well.

To-day he was giving a sermon after his own heart. The text he had taken for it was : ' Render therefore to Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's, and to God the things which are God's,' and he used it to illustrate the duties of tenants and labourers to their landlords and employers, and those of the latter to them. Not a bad text for an agricultural congregation ; but somehow in Lion's levelling hands the obligations of the landlords waxed far larger than those of the tenants ; while even that 'tribute penny' which was to be rendered to Cæsar in return grew 'small by degrees and beautifully less,' until it had dwindled into such insignificant dimensions that it showed a palpable ungenerosity and meanness in Cæsar to stoop to exact it at all.

It was a sermon which would have infuriated Mr Chawler and the Dilworth squirearchy in general, and shocked and angered his father ; but which was doubtless exceedingly satisfactory to Hodge sitting at the lower end of the church ; or rather would have been so, supposing that Hodge had understood anything about it. It is perhaps rather a hindrance, however, the enthusiasm of that rural but somewhat thick-skulled individual's admirers that he generally finds their perorations on

his behalf quite as unintelligible as the counter-arguments of his tyrants and oppressors, and that, unless provided with an interpreter, the former do not receive as much gratitude from him as the energy of their efforts in his service deserves.

Hodge understood Lion perfectly when he was sent for to the vicarage and rated in good frank language as from man to man for being drunk and lazy. He did the same when the curate sent poor consumptive old Hodge a jug of ale and plate of meat from his own table every Sunday, and apprenticed Widow Hodge's eldest son to a good trade, when his father's death left the boy, with seven others, on the poor woman's hands.

All that sort of thing was plain and simple enough ; and Hodge modified the sheepish scowl with which he received the lecture by grinning at the charity, and vowing 'Parson were a good 'un in the main, an noan so bad there mightn't be worser ;' but when Lion trenched on higher ranges of thought or action, when he met poor lost Lizzie Hodge sitting under a hedge with her fever-stricken bastard child on her knee, and taking the little lad from her, carried him right across Epsom Common, and into the town, through a blinding snowstorm, the exhausted outcast mother clinging to his arm ; and when on the same day he sharply refused to allow even the smallest charity to able-bodied men and women who hadn't earned it, he became wholly unintelligible to the bucolic mind, and more than slightly repellent. Squire Chawler's curses, conjoined with his beef and coals at Christmas, were far easier to comprehend, as were the indiscriminate sixpences and soup tickets of the Miss De Boonyens, even when accompanied by the donors' shrinking avoidance of the objects of their liberality : and Hodge accepted both of these, and ran after them with a servile greediness which at times lashed his would-be champion and idealiser into almost impatient despair.

To-day, if he roused excitement in anyone it was in Jenny. Disagreeing utterly with his social theories, while reverencing and admiring with her whole heart the nobility of character which gave them birth, he kept her in a small tempest of enthusiasm and depreciation which held her attention riveted on his words to the exclusion of all else ; and only when the hymn was given out at the end, and she turned towards her sister with the book which they shared in common, did she notice that the latter's cheeks too were glowing with equal fire, and her eyes brilliant with an expression quite different from the angelic indifference which they usually wore in church.

Jenny was sure that Sybil was feeling with her, and burnt

with eagerness to discuss the whole subject as soon as they were free. She rather hurried their exit from church, when the service was over, in her impatience to get away from the other people and begin the comments which were tingling on her lips, and had just succeeded in beguiling her sister into a different path from the rest, when a very stylishly-dressed lady, whom she only knew by sight, disengaged herself from the crowd, and crossing the grass held out her hand to Sybil with a greeting quite effusive in its cordiality.

‘How do you do, Miss Dysart? What a long time since we have met! And what a clever preacher you have! Quite delightful to hear anything so original. I almost wish we were in this parish, but at anyrate my friend Mr Vane here owns I haven’t brought him to church to-day to hear twaddle. By the way, let me introduce—Mr Vane, Miss Dysart. What! You have met before?’

‘Twice, I think,’ said Gareth, with a smiling look into Sybil’s eyes; and those stag-like ones of Jenny’s opened to indignant width. A handsome enough man, this stranger; but what business had any stranger to make her sister blush by staring at her so boldly, and to offer her his hand with almost the eagerness of an old friend?

‘Very free and easy! I hope she will snub him well,’ said Miss Jenny to herself.

Apparently Sybil had left church in a more charitable mood. She let Gareth take her hand and even smiled too; and he bent a little forward and said something which, if Jenny could have believed her ears, sounded like,—

‘You see I was right. We *have* met again. I am so glad.’ At that moment, however, Mrs Jacobson had turned to her, and in listening to and answering her, the girl felt that she might not have caught the words properly. She had not bargained, however, for what followed. The stockbroker’s lively young wife was certainly disposed to earn her guest’s gratitude by no half measures, and to that end she poured out pretty speeches and civilities on Jenny, asking why she and her sister never came to Birchwood. The latter had called once, and Mrs Jacobson had quite hoped she would do so again. It wasn’t so very far, nothing like the distance to Dilworth, and she knew they visited there. Indeed, she would have called at Hillbrow herself, but that never having met Mrs Dysart she felt rather shy. She was quite charmed that they had happened to encounter one another that morning.

While all this was being uttered she had moved on, keeping Jenny at her side, while Gareth and Sybil were left to follow. Jenny would have found it impossible to detach herself without positive rudeness; but it was not pleasant to her, for she knew nothing of Mrs Jacobson save that she had once met her at a juvenile cricket-match at Chadleigh Park, and that she had heard Lion allude to her as 'rather rapid.' She disliked 'rapid' ladies, however, with all her heart, and Mrs Jacobson's over-bright eyes and bloom, her gorgeous dress, her jewellery, and the lisp with which she spoke, all tended to confirm her belief in the justice of the stricture and to inspire her with repugnance. She answered very coldly, her soft, high-bred tones sounding as if iced, and walked as slowly as she could, glancing behind her for her sister at intervals, in the hope of a rescue; but it is not easy for nineteen when shy and modest to snub nine-and-twenty when neither, and Mrs Jacobson did not seem to see the intention.

'This is your way too, I suppose,' she said, cheerfully. 'I told our coachman to wait for us in the village; for my horses are young and not very well broken, and a clash of church bells is apt to make them skittish. By the way, you ride, don't you, Miss Dysart? Your sister does, I know; such a pretty horse, almost the same colour as my Rosabelle. Why don't you ride over to Birchwood to lunch some day?'

Certainly there was no way of checking Mrs Jacobson's friendliness or getting away from her, and she walked on at such a pace that Jenny was afraid Sybil would feel herself deserted, and did not wonder she found it impossible to keep company with them. It was a comfort to her to reflect that when they gained the highroad their ways lay in opposite directions; but even then Mrs Jacobson made a stand, and not satisfied with saying good-bye, assailed Sybil with the same warmth of invitations which she had lavished on her sister.

'Your sister tells me she doesn't ride. I am so sorry, for I have been teasing her to come and see me; but you do, I know, so you have no excuse. Now do come to luncheon some day. I shall be so glad. I've been wanting to see more of you ever since that pleasant afternoon on the cricket-field, and you must excuse informality. We Mickleham people are shockingly informal, aren't we, Mr Vane?'

'Are you?' he said, laughing. 'If so, I am glad of it. I like informality when I like the people it brings me among.'

He looked towards Sybil as he spoke, and though her face

was turned towards Mrs Jacobson, he saw the colour mount into it.

‘I shall be very glad to come some day,’ she said, shyly.

CHAPTER II

JENNY DIFFERS.

‘My dear Sybil, what a horrid woman! And how could you be dragged into saying you would go to see her?’ Jenny exclaimed, as the sisters, released at last, turned their steps home-wards. ‘You are not half severe enough in putting people down. I did my best, but it wasn’t much good, and I hoped you would have seconded one.’

Sybil laughed. She was still looking a little flushed and excited, just enough to make her prettier than ever, and Gareth had thought so, as for the second time he took her hand in bidding her good-bye. His eyes said as much; but fortunately she was as unconscious of their meaning as of the outraged state of Jenny’s feelings.

‘Was Mrs Jacobson pushing? I didn’t notice it,’ she said. ‘I thought she seemed very kind; and I did go there once, you know; Lion took me. What didn’t you like in her, Jenny?’

‘*What?*’ repeated Jenny. The question rather took away her breath. She had never contemplated the idea that Sybil would not agree with her, or that there could be two opinions on the subject. ‘Why, everything. Her over-talk, and her over-dress, and her lisp, and even her colour; for I am sure it was artificial. Why, Sybil, I should have thought she was just the woman you and Lion would have most abominated. I am certain she is not a lady.’

There could be no suspicion as to artificiality in Sybil’s colour, it came too readily; but with it there was a look of displeasure at present, and she answered more decidedly than was at all her wont.

‘I am not given to “abominating” people, Jenny, and I think it is a pity to use such strong expressions even if Lion does. Besides, I hardly fancy he would have taken me into Mrs Jacobson’s house if he had had such a feeling against

her, and I don't think it is charitable to run down other women in that way. You will make very few friends if you get into the habit of it.'

It was on Jenny's lips to say that she would not care to make many friends of the Mrs Jacobson stamp; but she was so petrified by her sister's tone, and the fact that she was actually receiving a rebuke from such an unwonted source as Sybil's usually almost too acquiescent lips, that for the moment she hardly found words to answer at all. What had she said that was so uncharitable? Was it about the only too apparent rouge on Mrs Jacobson's cheeks? Well, perhaps she might have been wrong in her suspicions—she must have been in expressing them, or Sybil would not have been so vexed. Sybil, at any rate, was sure to be right.

'Was I running her down?' she said, very good-temperedly. 'I didn't mean to do so, poor woman! and perhaps she can't help her lisp. Still, Sybil, I must own I thought her very pushing; and if mamma had been there I expect she would have said the same. Surely you don't like her?'

'I don't either like or dislike people I know nothing about,' Sybil answered, with the same slight touch of petulance; 'but as for mamma— Well, Jenny, you know as well as I that it is not fair to quote her, seeing that she hardly ever takes to anyone. If we were to do exactly as mamma does, we might as well live in a hermitage at once; but I don't suppose that it was always so even with her, or that she shunned society before papa's death as she does now. And we have not even her excuse. We are not widows or—or middle-aged people.'

'I don't want to shun society, I am sure,' said Jenny, feeling herself put in the wrong, but hardly knowing how. 'Surely, however, one can tell good style from bad, and there is a difference between shutting oneself up in a hermitage and being a little particular. Indeed, I thought that you would have been more vexed than I because you were left to walk behind with that handsome, fast-looking man, who stared so rudely and shook hands when he was introduced to you as coolly as if—'

'He knew me already,' Sybil put in, her cheeks more crimson than pink now, but speaking in a much gentler tone. 'And so he did. Do you remember, Jenny, my telling you last autumn how nearly I was shot one day coming home through Farmer Dyson's field in the partridge season, and how kind and sorry the—the person was about it? Well, that was

the gentleman that we met to-day ; and I have seen him once since then as well : only last week, when Lion and I were out riding. I had dismounted while Lion went into a house and had tied Princess to a tree ; but she managed to loose herself and get away ; and fortunately he—this gentleman, was passing and caught her for me. I was very grateful to him for it, and I think, 'the soft eyes brightening, 'that if he had been a fast man he might have dispensed with an introduction altogether. As it was, I was very pleased to meet him again, and be able to thank him ; and I daresay you would have been the same in my place ; for nothing could have been kinder or more courteous than he was ; and he didn't even know who I was ; and must have thought me very awkward and troublesome, and—and foolish altogether.'

'Why, Sybil, of course I should,' cried Jenny, all the more penitently because Sybil's voice had assumed an almost tearful intonation, and instead of being the rebuker she seemed to be defending herself against some accusation of which her younger sister was certainly innocent. 'Only, how could I guess who he was? I remember that fright of yours quite well. It alarmed me even to hear of it ; and we didn't tell mamma lest it should upset her. I suppose that was why you didn't mention having met him again last week. Do you think he recognised you then?'

'Oh yes! Why, I recognised *him*, ' said Sybil, adding, simply : 'It was easier for me, however, because he is so much better-looking than most men. His features are so regular, and the eyes—Did you notice them, and the face altogether, Jenny? It is like a picture.'

But Jenny had been scolded, and was in a wilful mood.

'What picture? ' she asked, laughingly. 'No, no ; Sybil, I will forgive him for shaking hands with you under the circumstances, but I can't admire his eyes. They were like the wolf's in little Red Riding Hood. Take care of yourself, little sister. He has begun by shooting at you. He may end by eating you up.'

She turned in at their own gate as she spoke and held it open for her sister, laughing merrily still ; but Sybil's smile in answer was rather forced, and she was glad that Jenny turned off into the yard to visit Rolf the watch-dog, and so left her free to go to her own room alone. In her inward soul she was just a little annoyed, and inclined to think her sister pert and censorious. It was not well for such young girls to be

fond of saying sharp things and picking holes in other people. It made enemies for them, and they got a name for being satirical, she thought, with much grave concern for Jenny's well-being. For herself, as she had once said, she preferred Lady Ashleigh who liked everybody to Mrs Ashleigh who made fun of everybody; and there was no insincerity in her defence of Mrs Jacobson. That lady's over-effusiveness, dress, and paint had been all lost upon her, for the simple reason that the pleasure and surprise of seeing Gareth again prevented her from giving them a thought. In her innocence she looked on the meeting as a happy accident, and was glad of the outspoken cordiality which turned it to her account and set her acquaintance with the man, whose meetings with her had made so strong an impression on her mind, on a proper and conventional footing.

Sybil did not like mysteries and unconventionalities; and her last encounter with Gareth had left an uncomfortable feeling on her mind—a feeling which increased to actual embarrassment when, lifting her eyes during the sermon, she suddenly saw him in a pew not far from her and gazing at her with fixed, appealing eyes, as if seeking the recognition which she felt her cheeks were giving in spite of herself. Mrs Jacobson's friendly greeting and prompt introductions had set that all right; and Gareth seemed so delighted at it, spoke so gratefully of the happy '*chance*' which had brought him and his hostess to Chadleigh Church that morning, and said so many more pretty things to her, during the few minutes that they were together, than she generally received in the course of a fortnight, that she could not help feeling pleased and flattered too. It is all very well to be quite superior to admiration, and all very nice to be engaged to a man who goes in for sensible conversation instead of silly compliments; but at one-and-twenty compliments don't always seem silly, and sensible conversation sometimes wearies. Besides, Gareth's pretty speeches were not like the stereotyped, emasculated ones which the young men of Chadleigh End and its neighbourhood were wont to lay at the feet of the young ladies of the same parts. He spoke to her with an openness which would have been offensive if it had not seemed so wholly involuntary, a frank and natural recognition of a beauty which was no merit of hers, and of which it could do her no more harm to be aware than if she were a little child.

It was rather a way of Gareth's to talk to girls whom he ad-

mired as though they were children, and he a man of middle age and experience ; and it is true that he was aged—in the latter. Sybil was not. Perhaps for that very reason she felt inclined to admire him more unreservedly than if he had been quite a young man. Indeed, she thought him much older than he was ; the very way in which he alluded to Lionel as a 'young fellow of much promise' seeming to stamp himself with the seal of seniority, and to take any sound of impertinence from a speech he made as he showed Sybil a few half-withered flowers in his buttonhole.

' Do you know what hand dropped these ? I have kept them carefully, for I had a fancy that I should touch it with mine before they faded quite ; but they have needed a great deal of cherishing to make my fancy come true.'

And Lion had knocked their fellows into the dirt and trampled on them ! Sybil must have been more than strong-minded not to feel mortified and flattered at the same moment.

She said no more about it however. Jenny's railery, either because it vexed her, or because she was annoyed at being vexed by it, had that effect—it sealed her lips ; a bad thing in a woman, say what you will to the contrary. Feminine enthusiasms are like wood fires, easily enkindled, quickly burnt out. Suffer them to blaze away in the open air with the four winds of heaven scattering every flame as it arises, and they will soon die down into a pinch of ashes which a breath can dissipate. Shut them up in a kiln excluded from light or air, and those ashes will glow with a red and steady heat, and maintain their smouldering fire for a length of time beyond ordinary calculation.

Talk is a woman's safety-valve. It is not till she is deprived of that medium for mental evaporation that she becomes dangerous.

If, however, Jenny's little joke about Red Riding Hood's wolf prevented her sister from saying any more to her of its object, Sybil's strictures had the effect of silencing the young girl on the score of Mr Vane's hostess ; and when later in the afternoon she overheard her sister giving an account of the meeting with Mrs Jacobson to her mother, and describing, in her own pleasant way, the former's friendliness and agreeability, Jenny glided out of the room, lest her silence should appear like dissent ; and a dissent all the more unamiable because she saw, from Sybil's way of putting it, that Mrs Jacobson's warm

admiration of Lion formed the chief ground for her sister's appreciation of the lady.

Mrs Dysart thought the same, and laughed a little as she answered, stroking the fair head which was so soon to belong to her no more ; 'I'm afraid my daughter would find something charming in anyone who admired her lover. Still, I own our Lion's sermons are a trifle better than those of young curates in general ; and it shows a certain superiority in a woman of these parts' (there was always a modicum of fine scorn in Mrs Dysart's allusions to the neighbourhood where she had elected to dwell) 'to be able to appreciate the difference. The boy will be flattered if people from Mickleham come to hear him.'

'And London people too, mamma,' said Sybil, a little eagerly. Jenny the irreverent being away, she could not forego this allusion to Gareth. 'For the gentleman with Mrs Jacobson, a Mr Vane, had only run down from town for a few days ; and he said he would rather hear Lion than a good many fashionable London preachers. He was a literary man himself, he told me so—and that he knew most of the men of the day—so he ought to be a judge. I—I should have liked you to have seen him, mamma.'

'Ah, I have drifted out of the world of literary people since I came down here,' sighed Mrs Dysart ; 'but it was for you girls, and it has been all for the best. I would rather see people through your eyes now. If Mrs Jacobson calls, as you say she wants to do, I will submit to it for Lion's sake ; but for my own I know quite enough people.'

She did not say anything about submitting to see Mrs Jacobson's friend ; and the idea would not even have occurred to Sybil herself. She had done her duty in mentioning him, and in doing so, had persuaded herself, as well as her mother, that any interest she might feel in him was on Lion's account. Dear Lion ! It was pleasant to hear him praised by strangers ; more especially by one who gave her the idea of being inclined to both cynicism and irony in general, and who spoke of the most part of things in the *blasé*, scornful manner of a man who had sounded them all to the bottom and found them wanting.

Lion himself was shamelessly ungrateful however.

'*Mrs Jacobson !*' he exclaimed, in tones the reverse of complimentary, when, coming to call a day or two later he found Jenny digging away in the garden by herself, and heard that his lady-love was out, having been carried off for

a drive by the lady in question. ‘What on earth brought her here?’

‘She called,’ said Jenny rather shortly; then seeing further inquiries in Lion’s uplifted eyebrows: ‘Mamma had a headache and was lying down—she is now; so Sybil went down to do the polite; and as it was such a lovely day Mrs Jacobson persuaded her to go for a drive. Mamma said she might. She will be sorry, though, when she finds you came while she was out.’

‘I am sorry she went,’ said Lion. ‘Sybil is too good to be driving about with that vulgar little woman. What made her call here at all?’

‘Why, didn’t Syb tell you? She was at church last Sunday. I think she said she came over on purpose to hear you preach, and admired your sermon immensely. She walked as far as the turning with us afterwards, and praised your eloquence to the skies.’

‘Flummery!’ said Lion contemptuously. ‘I don’t believe she ever listened to a sermon in her life, or could tell you what it was about. Came over probably because she had a new bonnet too fine for anything but to be set up in rivalry against the Miss De Boonyens’ head-gear; and cried up my sermon because she knew your sister was engaged to me. Just like her; all bosh and flummery together!’

‘Who is uncharitable now?’ cried Jenny, looking up from the geranium she was planting to shake her trowel laughingly at her future brother. ‘If Sybil were here, wouldn’t you get a lecture! I did, the other day, for finding fault with this Mrs Jacobson; but she fancied that *you* liked her, Lion.’

‘*I*? Thank her for nothing! What put that idea into her head?’

‘Because you took her to call there once—she told me so—and *she* likes her.’

‘Then I’m very sorry for it. I took her? Oh yes; I remember now. There was an awful thunderstorm coming on, and Mrs Jacobson met us just at her own gate as we rode by, and insisted on our coming in for shelter. I didn’t like to refuse, because Sybil had a cold, and the other woman made such a fuss it would have seemed churlish; but I never thought she would have built up a visiting acquaintance on it.’

‘I am comforted,’ said Jenny demurely. ‘I was beginning to think I was very wicked in not falling in love with that Mrs Jacobson, Sybil seemed so shocked at my want of charity.’

'Ah, that was because she was always so tenderly charitable herself,' said Lion fondly, his momentary ill-humour passing away at the thought of his lady-love's good qualities. 'And after all, Jenny, it is better to be that than the opposite—for a woman, at anyrate. We men have to look at the darker side of life sometimes, or we could do nothing to lighten it.'

'And are women to do nothing that way, then?' asked Jenny, a little indignantly. 'Lion, I don't like that doctrine of yours. It's a greedy one. Why are men to have all the work and reality of life, while we sit still, with rose-coloured spectacles on our eyes, and our hands full of cotton-wool? It is easy to *say* that everything is bright and pretty if one can see nothing dark, and that everything is soft if one can feel nothing hard; but it isn't true. What I should like would be to grapple with the ugly and hard things in life and crush them out.'

'Or be crushed,' said Lion, smiling good-temperedly. He always teased Jenny when she got on her high horse, as he called it. 'Now, look here,' holding up a strong, sunburnt fist, 'put out your little hand by that, and tell me which is most fit to be used in a crushing crusade. I'm afraid, miss, those long slim fingers of yours might come out of the combat battered out of all their fair shape and womanliness. And how much good would they have done?'

'So long as one does any, one has no right to calculate the muchness,' said Jenny, thrashing the earth round her geranium vigorously. 'Besides, bruises heal, and dirt washes. My hands will be black enough by the time I've got these plants all in; but there's plenty of soap and water to make them white again; and mother will have a nice, bright bed of scarlet flowers to gladden her dear eyes in another week.'

'And old Martin would have done it in half the time, and saved the soap and water, if you had only kept to your own work, and shut your eyes to the ugly corner till he could attend to it.'

'As Sybil is shutting hers now to Mrs Jacobson's paint,' said Jenny mischievously.

'Just so. Sybil doesn't even see paint or falsity, because she is too pure and simple a lady herself to imagine that another lady could descend to such degradations. Therefore they don't hurt her.'

'They would me, Lion. They make me angry and disgusted; and when I see them I have the feeling that I would

almost as soon stoop to them myself, as make friends with the people who do so.'

'And I don't blame you for it. It is how a woman should feel; but Sybil is not like any other woman. She is too child-like, too— If you laugh at me I shall quarrel with you—but I want to say too angelic. Hers is a kind of child-angel character, to be guarded and watched over by others, without any desire to guard or watch itself.'

'And with you and me and the mammy for guardians, Lion; for you don't want to depose us altogether, do you?'

'No, only to take the "lion's share!" I claim that as my legal and baptismal right, Miss Jenny.'

'And you deserve it. I don't, for I was bad to-day. I wouldn't go into the drawing-room because I didn't like that woman, and I expect that is how poor Sybil got inveigled into the drive. You know how she hates to be discourteous.'

'Or to hurt anyone's feelings. Yes, sometimes I doubt whether she remembers that she has any wishes of her own, she is so ready to fall in with other people's. What will you bet that she won't even own to having been bored when she comes back? There, Jenny, leave those geraniums and come indoors, I've something to show you. A friend has sent me a parcel from New Zealand of the most lovely ferns; and I brought them round with me. They'll make your mouth water.'

Sybil in the meantime was on her homeward way, bowling smoothly along a broad, sunny road in Mrs Jacobson's stylish barouche, with that lady at her side, and Gareth's blue eyes looking into hers from the opposite seat. They had picked him up on the way, as he was "taking a walk," and he had gathered a little bunch of wild flowers—wood-anemones and violets like those Sybil had dropped the other day—which he gave her with a smile which supplied the need of any words. Perhaps he had never in all his idle life tried so hard to make himself agreeable to anyone as to this shy, sweet, maidenly girl, who was not like any other he was in the habit of meeting. She was so utterly destitute of coquetry, so innocently sweet and gracious, so trustful in others, and withal so exquisitely modest and dignified, that she fascinated him like some rare flower, or delicate perfume. Even Mrs Jacobson felt the charm, and tried to imitate the air and manner which contained it; and Gareth saw the effort, and laughed savagely within him at the absurdity of it. To him it was like an ape mimicking a dove; but he was ungrateful to make such a comparison; for poor Mrs Jacobson

was going out of her way for his pleasure, and she wasn't such a bad sort of woman after all. Of course she was vain, and vulgar, and loud; but there was no harm in her. She was quite as fond of her husband as Mrs Dysart could have been of hers; and if she 'went on' with Gareth Vane in a way which Jenny would have stigmatised as flirting, she cared no more in reality for that dangerous Apollo than for any other good-looking young man with sufficient spare time to enliven Birchwood now and then with a visit, and help her in keeping Matt at home of an evening. That Matt was a terribly black sheep —a good many shades blacker than Gareth, seeing that he was a married man, and that his tastes and habits were coarse by nature; and perhaps his wife wouldn't have used so much rouge now if she hadn't cried away a good deal of her natural bloom during the first year or two of her married life.

At present she was in high good humour—first, at having given the neighbourhood an opportunity of seeing one of the exclusive Miss Dysarts in her carriage; and secondly, at having secured an attraction to detain Gareth longer at Birchwood; and she therefore laid herself out to second his efforts at agreeability with such success, that when Sybil alighted at her own door, it was with the bright expression of one who had thoroughly enjoyed herself, and a sincere hope that mamma would let her accept an invitation to lunch at Birchwood, which had been given her for the following week.

'My last day in the country! Do come, *please*,' Gareth said, entreatingly; and Sybil thought she would certainly like to do so.

She came in radiant and glowing as the afternoon sunshine itself to the schoolroom where the other two were still bending over the oak table, a pile of dead ferns before them, one or two similar heaps—Jenny's old collections—littered about, and half-a-dozen open books scattered over floor and table. Jenny was just arguing something in her clear, eager treble, and Lion contradicting and disputing with her so warmly, that they did not hear the door open. Sybil held up both her pretty, grey-gloved hands.

'Oh, what a mess!' she cried, with half-real, half-laughing horror. 'Lion, you are too bad. Untidy yourself, and making Jenny worse. How am I to shake hands across all this litter?'

'Try,' said Lion, stretching across it to prison one hand in his big hold. 'Never you mind her, Jenny. She scolds us because she has been bored herself. Well, you poor victim to

politeness, how have you survived it? I was very angry to find you had gone.'

'Angry! Why?' asked Sybil innocently. 'Indeed it was very pleasant; and oh, Jenny, what do you think—'

But Jenny interrupted her.

'There, Lion, I told you so! Sybil never will own that being amiable to uncongenial people is unpleasant. I believe she makes a principle of it. Sybil, come and look at these lovely foreign ferns. Now, isn't this an asplenium? Lion declares it's a *gymnogramma*, but I am sure it's as like our *asplenium ruta-muraria* as it can be. Look.'

'Very like,' said Sybil, glancing at the fern without much attention. Dead plants were by no means as interesting to her as green and growing ones. 'But, Jenny, did you hear what I was saying? Mr Vane has been in Austria. He was there two years ago, and stayed several days in *our* town; he—'

'Mr Vane? Oh! the man with the Red Riding Hood wolf's eyes,' said Jenny. 'Was *he* with you, then? Does he live with the Jacobsons?'

'Surely that little Jewess hadn't the coolness to bring her men friends here?' cried Lion. 'What impertinence! It was well for her your mother wasn't down. Don't, for goodness' sake, get intimate with that woman, Sybil. Matt Jacobson is a thoroughly bad lot, fast and hard-living, and his friends are the same. Now, Jenny, you are putting the wrong ones together. That's no more an asplenium than I am. Look at the arrangement of the spores, and—'

Sybil went quietly away to take off her bonnet. She was not cross with either Lion or her sister for their strictures on her new friends, or their absorption in the occupation they had in hand; but she was disappointed. The drive had been so pleasant. Such pretty things had been said, both of her sister and her lover. Mr Vane had even compared the latter's style to Kingsley's, and expressed a wish to know him; and it had been so delightful to hear that old town on the Adriatic, where her earliest years were passed, spoken of with the interest of intimacy, even her father's name remembered and uttered with respect. She wanted to share her pleasure with Lion and Jenny, to tell them all about it; and her confidences had been rebuffed, and her friends sneered at!

When Jenny came running upstairs a little later to say tea was ready, and mamma and Lion calling out for their sunbeam to sweeten it, she went down at once and showed herself as

bright and serene as a sunbeam should ; but she said no more of her late companions, and Jenny did not even know where the little bunch of wild flowers came from, which she found, in a glass of water, on the table by her sister's bed.

CHAPTER III.

A NAME FROM THE GRAVE.

‘Down at Mickleham ? Nonsense ! He came back from there weeks ago. You must be mistaken.’

‘I don’t think so, ma’am, I only heard from my sister yesterday, and it was she who told me.’

Mrs Beverley turned round impatiently. She was sitting in front of her pier-glass, having her hair done, a book (one of Emile Zola’s) on her knee, and a dressing-gown all trimmed with costly lace wrapped round her. The sudden movement sent the volume on to the floor.

‘And how can your sister know ? What has she to do with Mr Vane ?’

‘Please, ma’am, she is school-room maid at the house where he is visiting—a Mrs Jacobson’s. It’s just outside Mickleham.’

‘Mr Jacobson’s, you mean, I suppose (though he may have a wife for all I know). Why, that must be Matt Jacobson ! Mr Vane brought him here once or twice : a man with a lot of black, curly hair and a lisp, a stockbroker. So—that is where he is ?’

She said the first words sharply, the last almost in a whisper, her head slightly bent, her dark pencilled brows contracted as if in thought ; but the maid who was brushing out the masses of crisp, blue-black hair, which fell in a dense curtain over her mistress’s shoulders to the ground, took the remark as addressed to herself and answered it.

‘Yes, ma’am. Polly says it’s the third time he has been down since the beginning of last month. He was there little over a week ago, but only for a day and night, so perhaps you didn’t know of it ; and now he is there again. Polly, don’t think it’s Mr or Mrs Jacobson he goes for, though.’

‘What do you mean ?’

Not at all as most mistresses would have answered a remark,

which, coming from a servant, was a decidedly impudent one, did Mrs Beverley put the question, but with a mingled fierceness and curiosity, unbridled as though the girl were her equal. Ladies of the Beverley stamp seldom go to the trouble of keeping up much reserve between themselves and their domestics.

‘Well, ma’am, Polly says it’s all for a young lady. Not that she is staying in the house. She lives over at Chadleigh End, four miles off; but every time Mr Vane goes down he manages to see her; and he don’t seem able to talk or think of nothing else. Mr and Mrs Jacobson, they chaff him about it at table quite open; but Polly says he don’t seem to mind. You know, ma’am, Mr Vane never is one to mind chaff about a lady. He calls her his “lily maid” hisself and drinks her health.’

‘A precious “lily,” I daresay! What is she? Some farmer’s daughter?’

‘Oh dear no! ma’am. Polly spoke of her just as if she were a real lady. She came riding over to lunch there one day, and Mr Vane he took and fed her horse hisself, and waited on her at table just as if she were a queen. She’s a sweet, fair young creature, Polly says, and—’

‘What’s her name?’ said Mrs Beverley irritably. ‘Do you think I want to hear all Polly’s nonsense? And don’t pull my hair so.’

‘If you would please not to jerk your head then, ma’am. Dysart is the name. She lives with her ma, the widow of an Eyetalian consul, so she calls herself; but, begging your pardon, ma’am, there’s folks as thinks that Miss Dysart never had a pa—not a proper one, that is.’

‘How did your Polly come to hear all this and write about it to you? She seems to take an interest in Mr Vane’s doings.’

‘No, ma’am, it’s in the young lady. Polly’s a Chadleigh girl herself and this is her first place from home, and of course she knows all the folks there.’

‘Then in that case you know them too, as it’s your home as well.’

The girl—she was a smart, pretty young woman, with that indefinable brazened expression too common among servant-maids in large cities, but I suppose she had grace left in her—coloured up and looked embarrassed.

‘Yes, ma’am—no, ma’am,’ she said, hesitatingly. ‘I mean I’ve been so many more years in service, ma’am, and always town service. I didn’t like village life.’

‘But you go home on a visit sometimes, I suppose?’

‘Not for a good while back, ma’am ; me and my people don’t agree well : they didn’t like my bettering myself. But I think I’ve heard of this Mrs Dysart all the same ; she and her daughters live quite alone like. Nobody knows much about them.’

Mrs Beverley laughed.

‘Just the sort of girl Mr Vane or any other gentleman would amuse himself with flirting with when they had nothing to do. Don’t waste your time and mine by talking of such folly. That plait has taken you half-an-hour. Make haste with it.’

But though the words sounded peremptory, Belle Beverley’s tone had completely altered. There was almost a complacent accent in it ; and the face reflected in the mirror had lost its painful and anxious flush. After all, she was used to Gareth’s flirtations, had even assisted at more than one of them ; and by so doing had gently accelerated its end. They were painful to her, of course, because she cared for him herself—horribly painful. To her tropical nature they could not be otherwise ; but she knew they were a part of his nature, necessary to him as it were ; and so long as they were only flirtations, and he drifted back to her when they were over, she tried not to mind them. Just now—for a moment, she had been stupidly frightened. She was afraid that this might be something more ; but the maid’s last words had reassured her. Some pretty, questionably-born, semi-genteel girl, a *protégé* of that horsey, bad style little Jew. No ; Gareth might be foolish about women, was so in a way ; but it was not a folly, as she knew to her cost, which had ever entangled himself to any serious extent ; and such a girl as this was not likely to cause it to do so now. The only thing which worried her was that he has been so silent about it.

And that worry grew.

For the moment, for five minutes, even ten, perhaps, she fancied herself quite reassured and comforted ; but the assurance could not have been complete nor the comfort satisfactory, for neither availed to last her through the day. Nay, even when driving leisurely along the crowded Row, her ample comeliness of figure set off by a tight-fitting garment of black satin richly braided and embroidered with gold, her Cleopatra duskiness relieved by a huge parasol of scarlet silk, the costliest of fox-skin rugs over her knees, and the nattiest of grooms at her back, the demon of uncertainty and suspicion raised by her maid’s gossip came back to her again and again, and each time with a more fiendish smile on its gibing lips, a crueler curve of its barbed talons, till the Park, with its gay crowds and glittering toilets—

gayer and more glittering than usual under the dazzling sunshine of a June morning—swam before her eyes like a mere phantasmal dream ; and, instead, she seemed to see only a girl's figure, a 'lily' face, and Gareth bending over it, 'serving her as though she were a queen.' Absurd, unlikely notion ! Most unlikely with Gareth, who, even in his most caressing moods towards herself, maintained a sort of semi-playful insolence, as though his homage were but half a jest and he cared not if she knew it ; but the vision stayed all the same. She could not drive it away ; and when she thought of his repeated absences of late, and the way in which, even when she did see him, he avoided any confidential talk with her or mention of where he had been, her worry of mind increased to a perfect fever ; and before the carriage had reached the end of the Park—a second time, she gave the check-string a sudden pull, and told the coachman, 'Home.'

'This sort of thing will drive me mad,' she said, between her teeth. 'I believe it's all nonsense, but how can one tell ? I will go and see his sister to-morrow ; perhaps she knows.'

It has been intimated already in this story that Mrs Hamilton and her cousin Tom Beverley's widow were not on intimate terms. Had the doctor's wife known the latter better, it is probable that they might not have been on visiting ones, Mrs Hamilton being an upright woman, with severe notions on the subject of feminine reserve and decorum ; but they lived so far apart, and in such widely different circles of society, that Gareth's sister really knew very little more of Mrs Beverley than he chose to tell her ; and with all his faults Gareth was hardly *lâche* enough to blacken a woman at whose house he was ever made a welcome guest, and whose affection for himself had been made apparent enough to endanger her own name.

Even Mrs Hamilton knew that 'Belle' was fond of her brother, and, knowing also that she was a rich and independent woman, she was not indisposed for that brother's sake to treat her with courtesy on the rare occasions when they happened to meet. It seemed to Mrs Hamilton the proper thing that poor men should marry rich wives. Her husband had done so, and owned all his good fortune in life to it. Why should not Gareth do the same ? Certainly Belle was not the woman she would have chosen for a sister ; but, after all, what sort of a woman was she in reality ? Her very frankness and audacity made it difficult to tell, and gave her the air of exaggerating her own defects, and her wealth assisted the delusion. As a poor

woman she would have been improper; as a rich woman she was simply eccentric. Mrs Hamilton was far too severe a moralist to tolerate an improper person; but she had sufficient worldly prudence to make allowances for an eccentric one.

For these reasons she refrained from ordering her servant to say 'Not at home,' or from assuming more than her ordinary frigidity, when at about the most unorthodox hour for visiting in the twenty-four, somewhere about eleven in the morning, she received a message that Mrs Beverley had called and was asking to see her.

The doctor's wife was seated in her morning-room at the time, engaged in the thoroughly proper and matronly task of knitting an under-vest for one of the younger children, while she heard her two elder girls read and recite their daily portion of Scripture; and she merely showed her sense of Mrs Beverley's outrage on conventionality by the muttered words: 'At *this* hour! What next?' and by declining to pretermit either of her occupations until the visitor was actually in the room and extending a hand in greeting to her.

Probably Mrs Beverley felt the hint thus conveyed, for she burst out into apologies as impetuous as her visit.

'Am I not a wretch to invade you at this hour? I wonder what you think of me for doing so. Something too horrid, I'm sure; but the fact is, I had to be in Surbiton this morning; and as I said to myself, what's the good of being cousins if I can't run in and see Helen in a friendly way? I only wish you'd do the same by me.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Hamilton coldly; 'but I am afraid that would be quite impossible. My morning duties always make calls before lunch out of the question. I have too much to do. Pray don't apologise for yourself, however.'

'That is as much as saying I am interrupting those same duties. Fortunate creature to have any! I haven't, or anything to do either. Don't you pity me?'

'Very much,' said Mrs Hamilton, with perfect sincerity; 'if it were true. According to my creed, however, Isabelle, everyone has some duties to perform in the world. Yes, Annie, my dear,' in answer to a mute appeal from the little girl still standing in front of her; 'you and Ella may go for the present. Take your Bibles with you.'

'There are two, at anyrate, who won't quarrel with Cousin Belle's naughtiness and idleness if it gets them off a lesson,' said Mrs Beverley, detaining the child by the arm to give her a

laughing kiss. 'Give them a holiday, Helen, do. I don't often come ; and I had no idea you taught them yourself.'

'I do not, in general matters. Religious teaching, however, ought, I think, to be invariably the mother's province. No ; I don't think a holiday from that would be desirable at any time, or that they would wish for it. Run away now, my children. I will send for you later.'

'Poor things, how implacable you are !' laughed Mrs Beverley. 'Kiss me first then, Annie. Do you know you are very pretty, child ? Your eyes are exactly the colour of Gareth's. Ella's are not ; but then she's the image of her father—always was, weren't you, Ella ? Bless me, child, you needn't blush and look so frightened. Papa's a very handsome man ; you ought to be proud of resembling him.'

Poor little Ella did not look proud. She simply blushed deeply and cast an apprehensive glance at her mother. She was the eldest of the little Hamiltons, and knew in some mysterious way that to resemble papa was to displease mamma. She might have gathered it, perhaps, from the slight frown which had crossed the latter's brow at the words ; but Mrs Hamilton said nothing. She only pointed gently to the door, and the two children, early trained to prompt obedience, went away without a word.

'Now I am to be scolded !' said Mrs Beverley, laughing. 'But all the same, Annie is pretty, Helen ; you can't deny it.'

'I would rather she were not told so. Personal remarks are bad for children. Annie's foible is vanity already.'

'It'll be a bigger foible by-and-by when those eyes have learnt how to do damage. I told Gareth once he might have been a saint but for his.'

'A sanctity without much merit, I am afraid. How is Gareth, Isabelle ? I suppose you have seen him later than I ?'

'I haven't seen him for ages. He might be dead and buried for that matter ; but I suppose he is devoting himself to this new flame of his, so I don't trouble my head with much anxiety about him. Do you know her, Helen ? I hear she is rather pretty.'

'Her ? Who ?' asked Mrs Hamilton, opening her eyes.

She was beginning to gather the motive—incredible as it seemed to her prouder nature—of Mrs Beverley's impromptu visit.

'To betray herself so to another woman, how *can* she ?' she

thought. 'No wonder Gareth holds her cheap, and that poor Tom Beverley used to look so unhappy!'

Mrs Beverley burst into a hard little laugh.

'You don't mean to say you don't know about it?' she said. 'Well, I know men won't always keep their sisters *au fait* of their little flirtations; but as the damsel is a native of these parts, and lives not far—Why, doctor, is that you? I thought you were never at home of a morning.'

Mrs Hamilton's sitting-room had two doors, one of which opened into the drawing-room. This was open at present, and through it Belle Beverley saw the doctor enter the outer room, and begin to rummage among some papers in a secretaire, as if in search of something. He had certainly not come up for a chat with his wife, for he never even glanced at the inner doorway, in full view of which she was sitting, and Mrs Beverley's sudden exclamation made him start. She leaned forward and put out her hand to him, and he could not do otherwise than come and speak to her; but she was by no means a favourite of his, and even as he did so he took out his watch, glancing from it to the severely impassive face of his wife as though to intimate that his stay would not be for long.

'No more I am, after ten,' he said, answering the widow's greeting with his pleasant smile. 'I am only here now while they are getting the carriage out. I finished my morning round in town early to-day, and have to see a patient in Esher before lunch.'

'Take me with you,' said Mrs Beverley audaciously. 'I came by train, and would just as soon go back by Esher as not. It won't be against the proprieties, I suppose, Helen? My reputation ought to be safe with a "grave and reverend signior" like your husband.'

'What about mine, though?' laughed the doctor. Mrs Hamilton's face had assumed a stony expression, and she did not vouchsafe a word. 'But unfortunately I am not going anywhere near the station at Esher, and—don't think me very ungallant, Mrs Beverley—I should be a wretchedly dull companion for you in any case; for I always read up my notes on the cases I am visiting on the way to them, and I was just looking out some on this when you spoke to me. Mrs Hamilton will tell you that it is a habit with doctors, and a very necessary one.'

His wife looked up with a keen, angry flash in her eyes, a two-barbed one, travelling from Belle Beverley to himself.

'I do not know anything as to the necessity of your habits in general,' she said, with an accent of such freezing sarcasm that even her guest's *sang froid* was startled, 'but if you have made this appointment to meet Isabelle Beverley, and drive her out to-day, she will probably expect you to dispense with the one you speak of while you are with her. I do not imagine that you are often—ungallant!'

Mrs Beverley opened her eyes to their widest.

'Appointment!' she repeated. 'I had no appointment with Dr Hamilton. What could put such an idea in your head? It was a sudden idea of my own that he might drive me to Esher; and I think he's awfully ungallant to refuse, especially after all the lifts I have given his brother-in-law. By the way, did you hear us talking of Gareth's last flirtation, doctor? I was just asking your wife if she knew the girl.'

'Which I do not,' said Mrs Hamilton. 'Gareth's women friends are not often chosen from among my acquaintances; and probably would be the last I should care to include among them. He is unfortunate, poor fellow! in their selection; but I suppose it is difficult for a young man, and a good-looking one, to be as exclusive as a woman. Did you say, however, that this girl lives here in Surbiton?'

'No, but in Surrey, within ten miles of you; and as I hear that he has paid three visits to her within the last three weeks, and is staying there now, I thought you would most likely know something about it. I suppose' (with a desperate affectation of carelessness which would not have deceived a kitten) 'that there is no hope of its turning out anything serious; leading to matrimony, I mean.'

'That depends on the person, I fancy,' said Mrs Hamilton, more gravely than unkindly—Belle's bewilderment at the idea of an appointment was too manifestly real to be suspected. 'For my part, I should be thankful to see him married to anyone in a good position and who would exert a good influence over him, and I am quite sure of one thing' (with an emphasis which might be intended to reassure her visitor), 'that though Gareth may be foolish, there is no harm in him. He will only marry for love; and whatever he may have been as a bachelor, he will be a good and faithful husband. As to this new admiration, however, I have never even heard of it. Indeed, I fancy you see more of him and his doings than I do.'

'Well, you see poor Tom and he were quite like brothers,' said Mrs Beverley quickly—it was a speech she had made so

often that I almost think she had got to believe in it herself—‘and then, living in town, my house is handy for him to come to when he likes; but old friends get put on one side for new flirtations, and I never expect to see anything of him during the progress of one. I don’t suppose, however, that you would like this to prove anything serious, for, from what I gathered, the girl is of somewhat dubious extraction, daughter of the *soi-disant* widow of some Italian consul, a Miss Dysart and—Why! why! doctor, take care! Oh! what a pity!’

A pity, indeed! Dr Hamilton, who during the above conversation had been putting his notes together in the outer room, had just come forward as Mrs Beverley was speaking, to bid her good-bye. Whether in doing so he trod on something and stumbled, or what caused the accident, those inside could not tell. All they saw was that the violent start he gave brought his elbow in contact with a pretty Indian vase which stood on a bracket near the door and knocked it to the ground. The pieces were scattered all about, and the doctor’s face went quite white with annoyance.

‘I—I beg your pardon!’ he exclaimed, turning to his wife. ‘I really am very sorry—very. How could I have been so awkward! Such a handsome vase too! I hope we shall be able to match it.’

‘If I were, Helen, I shouldn’t care about breakages while I had a husband to make such pretty apologies for them,’ laughed Mrs Beverley. ‘Why, Helen, he is nervous! His hands are shaking still, and he’s as white as ashes. You ought to comfort him. Was it a unique specimen?’

‘On the contrary, a very ordinary one,’ said Mrs Hamilton, rising quietly to ring the bell for a maid to remove the fragments. She simply looked at her husband; and Mrs Beverley, seeing the look, rose too, and said good-bye. Helen was always an enigma to her, and at present her ungracious ignoring of the doctor’s regret for the accident, and the look of more than concern on his face, seemed to her like forewarnings of a domestic storm.

‘In which I should be sure to take his part, and make Helen furious with me,’ she said to herself. ‘What’s a bit of china, more or less? But I believe she has a fearful temper; and, after all, as she knows nothing whatever about the girl, I may as well go home.’

The doctor went with her to the gate, his momentary discomposure over, and his face wearing its pleasantest smile again.

‘If you walked from the station, you must go back to it in my carriage,’ he said, cordially. ‘It is ready, I see, and I am not, so it won’t in the least delay me; and give our love to Gareth when you see him. I suppose this—a—new love of his is a Londoner, as you know about her?’

‘Oh no; didn’t you hear me telling Helen she lives at Chadleigh End?’

‘Chadleigh—where?’

‘Chadleigh End, near Mickleham; you know. He is staying there.’

‘Chadleigh End? Oh, ah! That’s quite a small village, isn’t it? Any gentry there ought to be well known to the rest. And I think you said the name was—’

‘Dysart; so my maid tells me, at least. She’s the one that I took after your wife parted with her, you know; but she is a Chadleigh girl by birth, and knows all about these people. They say Gareth is quite infatuated with the young woman; toasts her as his “lily-maid” at other people’s houses.’

‘Ah! she is fair, then?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know. My maid says so; but I hardly think it,’ said Mrs Beverley pettishly. He used to hate fair women. I’ve heard him say so a dozen times.’

‘I know at any rate that he does not hate dark ones—some at any rate,’ said the doctor politely. ‘Ah! here’s the carriage; let me put you in. Is this your parasol? Good-bye. Such a pleasure to have seen you.’ He stood with his hat off, smiling still, as the carriage rolled away, and then turned back into the garden. A great change had come over his face in that moment. It wore the same look it had done when he broke the china: a pained, anxious, almost livid pallor, which gave him the appearance of being twenty years older than he was; and his fingers shook again, as drawing out his note-book, he wrote down in it the words ‘Chadleigh End,’ adding, after a moment’s thought, ‘Tuesday.’

‘Not that I am likely to forget it,’ he said to himself half aloud. ‘What does it mean? *Dead* all these years, dead—thank God! and now for Gareth—’

A burst of baby-laughter, and two small mischievous beings, his youngest children, came skipping through the laurels one in pursuit of another. There was a pause, and a shy up-glancing in surprise at the sight of papa, so seldom at home; but Dr Hamilton held out both hands encouragingly, his brow cleared as if by magic, and his face bright with fatherly tenderness.

'Well, you monkeys, what are you up to?' he said, gaily. 'Come hear, Dollie, my wee woman, and give papa a kiss, the biggest you've got in that nice little mouth.'

Little Dollie came forward willingly enough, pouting out her red lips in preparation; but the kiss was not given. Her mother's hand on her shoulder detained her. Mrs Hamilton must have been close behind her husband, though he had not seen her, and her sudden appearance startled him as much as it did the children.

'Dollie, Fred, how come you in the front garden?' she said, with grave reproach. 'Do you not know that it is forbidden? And no hats on either in this sun! Come indoors and get them.'

She took a child by either hand, and walked slowly towards the house with them. The doctor made no remonstrance. If he had been going to do so, the one look he encountered from her eyes must have quelled his purpose. Only there was a good deal of bitterness mingled with the wonted melancholy in his own as he left the garden to resume his interrupted duties.

Little Dollie, however, was not quite so placable. Her lips remained pouted out, though with the reverse of kissing intentions, and as they entered the house she ventured on a rebellious murmur,—

'Papa was doin' to pay wis Dollie. Her would lite to pay wis her papa, her would.'

'Papa has his work to attend to. He has no time to play with little girls,' said Mrs Hamilton gravely. 'Can't my Dollie play with someone else?'

The little face was lifted eagerly.

'Wis oo, mammy? Will oo pay wis Fwed an' me? Oh, do, dat will be *nearly* as nice as wis papa.'

But Mrs Hamilton, instead of answering, took her hand from the dimpled coaxing fingers, and motioned the child from her.

'Go both of you to the playroom,' she said. 'Nurse will amuse you. She—is the proper person.'

Poor little Hamiltons! Dragged away from the kind, smiling papa, who would have welcomed them, and ordered away by the grave, colder-mannered mamma, they trotted soberly down the long corridor hand in hand, with wistful eyes and depressed corners to their mouths, and a general sense of guilt and injury on them. Dollie was still the refractory one.

'Papas *has* time to pay wis childwen,' she muttered, stubbornly. 'Minnie Taylor's papa pays wis her.'

'Our papas and mammas is different from uvver people's,' said Fred, with sobriety. He was used to the difference, and accepted it uncomplainingly; but it oppressed him all the same. The little Hamiltons were not happy children.

CHAPTER IV.

HERALDING SHADOWS.

GARETH meanwhile was amusing himself.

Begun in the merest spirit of idleness, a sport rendered pleasing by a pretty face, and piquant by a nature sweeter and more unspoilt than he was in the habit of encountering, his pursuit of Sybil had grown from a jest into a passion; and the half-laughing gibe addressed to Mrs Jacobson about 'cutting out the parson' had become, so far as that lady and the latter were concerned, very real earnest. It was well that he was a favourite with the former; for in those summer weeks following his first introduction to Sybil Dysart she saw more of him than she had ever done in her life; and Matt Jacobson began to derive a high moral satisfaction from the reflection that there could be no harm in winning money from a guest night after night at billiards or *écarté*, when that guest was there by his own invitation and to suit his own convenience. *De plus*, Matt admired what he had seen of Belle Beverley, and reminded himself that if Gareth came down into Surrey to flirt, he might go up to London for the same purpose without fear of rivalry.

Mr Vane himself made no secret whatever of the charm which drew him down to Mickleham and Chadleigh End. To meet Sybil at some garden-party or picnic, to get her to himself for a few minutes and beguile her into expressing a desire to read some new poem or possess some rare flower, was but the prelude to his appearing at Birchwood a day or two later, bringing with him the flower or poem aforesaid, and openly avowing that the sole object of his visit was to lay these offerings at the feet of his new idol. Once or twice Mrs Jacobson said to him, with a laugh,—

'What is all this going to end in? Are you really prepared to fight a duel with young Ashleigh? It will come to that if you make her fall in love with you; and you know how irresistible you are. Why don't you try your fascinations on some-

one who is free to accept them? Don't forget that I am waiting to be asked to your wedding! Matt is to give me the most expensive bonnet of the season for it, and I am getting impatient.'

'Pray don't vulgarise my passion by bringing such commonplace details as weddings and bonnets to bear on it,' said Gareth gaily. 'I am ready to fight young Ashleigh now or at any time, if he and you both wish it. It is crime enough on his part to have known Sybil Dysart before I did. He may take that for his consolation however. One can't be both first and last with a woman!'

But though Gareth joked about his 'passion,' it was one none the less; and perhaps he could not have answered her more satisfactorily. In truth, he had never thought how it was to end. To lavish time, money, and energy on a pursuit which had no definite good or object, even in his own mind, was just one of the bits of reckless folly in which the man delighted. Endings were never things in his line. He preferred the commencement of affairs. His whole life was a series of commencements and breakings off; and there had been at times sufficient pain and discomfort in the latter to make him shrink from contemplating them beforehand. The doubt in his mind, that which gave piquancy to his present pursuit, was whether his fascinations were as irresistible with Sybil as Mrs Jacobson thought them likely to be.

They ought to have been. She was so soft and sweet, so unspoilt, so trusting in the good faith of all about her, so easily impressed by flattery or kindness, that the warmth and the pertinacity of his devotion should have been sufficient to touch and win her; yet even to his own heart he could not say that they had done so. Her very simplicity baffled him. Her tranquil serenity became at times a torture. It was these which made her so difficult to read. Other women with far deeper and more complex characters were infinitely easier to decipher. He had only to bestow a tender glance, or a sympathetic word in an undertone on Miss Saunders, and next time he touched the poor thing's hand it went cold and damp with agitation, and he could not go in or out without finding her in his way with mournful, feverish eyes fixed on him, in a wistful way which was almost irritating; but the delicate rose-colour, which had once or twice flattered him by rising to Sybil's cheeks at his approach, mantled there as readily at any other little surprise, or even at the mention of her lover's name.

The little hand which rested in his ardent pressure with a soft reliance, very sweet and touching, might, for aught he knew, lie as trustingly in any other palm. That liquid, childlike glance in the blue eyes, which seemed to appeal to him alone, might have the same language for any other gaze. How could he *know*? And he wanted to do so. He wanted at least to make sure if she had any feelings at all, or if they were so absorbed by her betrothed that the devotion of anyone else simply made no impression on her. He was one of those men who would rather that a woman hated than that she was indifferent to them. The Jacobsons and their friends were fond of talking of the Dysart exclusiveness, the Dysart stand-offishness, the Dysart absorption in their own circle and indifference to everybody outside it. It was the very thing to set Gareth on fire. To make it apparent that this exclusiveness was relaxed for him, that this stand-offishness accepted him, that he had overridden the superiority and melted the indifference was something worth trying for. Sybil must learn to care for him a little. That tranquil heart must flutter at his approach, those even pulses thrill under his touch. She might marry her parson-lover afterwards if she would; but that victory at least he must have gained. It was the pleasantest little campaign for a summer month.

One day he and the 'parson lover' met. It was at Farmer Dyson's. Lion had some business with the yeoman, and the latter told him that he had a 'Lunnon gent' lodging with him for a week.

'Been 'ere afore fur a few days' shooting in the autumn,' said the farmer, 'but this time 'tis fur quiet and to do some littery work. 'Tis a gent as writes fur the s'ciety papers. Oh, 'ere he be!'

Gareth happened to be coming out at the moment, and he and Lion met and were introduced, and I rather think at that first meeting that Lion took to him. The handsome face, frank manner, and occasional incisiveness of his conversation were not without their pleasant effect on men as well as women, and Gareth himself was rather curious to know his rival. He wanted to see what the man was like whom Sybil did love. He told Lion, therefore, that he had run down to the country to get up some articles for a certain weekly paper bearing on local agricultural questions, and the young curate fired into interest on the instant. They walked a good way together, and before they parted Lion had asked him to come

and see him at the vicarage. Nay, he did more ; for, being interested in his companion, and finding that they had several mutual acquaintances, he asked him to dinner ; and Gareth went, wondering amusedly whether his rival would next offer to take him to Hillbrow ; and if so, what he should do. He was not troubled with ultra-conscientious scruples, and was of opinion that the proverb, 'All's fair in love and war,' permitted of a very broad translation ; but to allow this young fellow, his junior in all senses of the word, to take him to the house of his betrothed, for the sole reason that he might get up a flirtation with the young lady, seemed even to him a somewhat black-guardly proceeding, and he accordingly decided against it.

He need not have done so, as his self-denial was not to be tried. Young Ashleigh's reverence for the little household, which served as a shrine for his own precious pearl, Sybil, was far too great to allow him to introduce into it any, or every stranger who happened to be amusing or agreeable to himself ; and on the other side Gareth was not enough of a hypocrite to make it seem in any way desirable to make an exception in his favour. Even to Sybil he said,—

'Please don't fancy I am a saint, Miss Dysart, or even a good orthodox Christian ; for I am nothing of the sort. I've been a graceless ne'er-do-weel all my life ; and I shall be so to the end. If you were one of the Mrs Grundys of the world you wouldn't speak to me. You'd go on the other side, and look the other way when you saw me coming ; and perhaps, as you're so young and innocent, I ought to tell you to do so, anyhow ; but I'm not sufficiently heroic. When a poor lonely devil like myself has had one glimpse of heaven, and only one, in all his life, he must be more than self-denying if he can shut his eyes to it, and not want to see it again.'

And Sybil, who saw plenty of good orthodox, unexciting Christians in the persons of the Ashleighs and her own family, thought him all the more interesting for his candour ; and even began to wonder if she might not be doing a great act of virtue, and reclaiming this fascinating reprobate from his erring ways, by showing him a little kindness and encouragement. It isn't easy to condemn a person severely, who not only condemns himself in advance, but exalts you in a way altogether novel and flattering ; and though Sybil was well used to being petted and cared for, even Lion, with all his fondness for her, had never admitted that her presence was his only heaven.

To the curate, however, Gareth simply showed himself as

he was, a bright, cleverish, languidly-cynical man about town, sufficiently gentlemanly and amusing, but not troubled with over-strictness of morals, nor careful to assume them because his companion wore a white cravat, and had charge of a rural parish ; and Lion, who could go his own way without being a prig, listened and laughed and made him welcome ; but had as little notion of introducing him to Sybil or Jenny as of flying. He never even mentioned the family by name, and Gareth followed his example.

It happened, however, that on the very next day, as Sybil was on her way to visit a poor woman on the other side of Chadleigh Heath, she encountered Mr Vane strolling along with so careless and *dégagé* an air, that he might have been an old resident in the place instead of a casual visitor, only that no old resident could have brought such a vivid crimson to her cheeks, such startled pleasure and surprise to her eyes. It had been rather dull at home of late. Ever since mamma had made Mrs Jacobson's acquaintance, an event which was sure to happen in time, Sybil's nascent intimacy at Birchwood had been silently vetoed ; and now that Adelaide also was gone (she had been married to Captain Lonsdale in the spring), Dilworth had lost its chief attraction for her. True, Jenny had been allowed to 'come out' since then ; but there had been no particular gaieties of late to come out for ; and only the promise of a dance at Squire Chawler's to look forward to. It was all very stupid together ; and Sybil could not help thinking of those lively lunches at the Jacobsons', with Gareth Vane waiting on her, and of the racy talk and flattering speeches which had made the time pass so pleasantly. She wondered whether she should ever see him again, whether mamma would not let her call on Mrs Jacobson and return that book of his ; and whether, if she did, she should hear anything about him. Altogether he was a good deal in her mind just then ; and now, when she saw him so suddenly before her, surprise and pleasure almost took away her powers of speech ; and for the moment, at anyrate, Gareth had the triumph of thinking that the object of his pursuit was gained. Would a woman who was really indifferent to him colour so richly and stop short, with such a lovely, wondering brightness in her eyes ? His own heart beat faster than usual at the sight ; but the man of the world had greater mastery over himself than an inexperienced girl, and he met her eyes with smiling self-possession.

‘Miss Dysart, this is delightful. I was just thinking of you ; and you come to meet me as if in answer to my thought. Did some good spirit lead you ?’

He had taken her hand in speaking, and he was almost sure now that it trembled a little as she answered him.

‘No, indeed. I am only going to visit some of my poor people. But what brought you here, Mr Vane ? I thought you were in London.’

‘No ; I have taken lodgings in this neighbourhood for awhile to do some literary work. Are you vexed at it ?’

‘Vexed ? No, Mr Vane. Why ?’ And she blushed deeper than ever at the idea.

‘Because you looked so astonished at the mere sight of me.’

‘That was because I fancied you were ever so far away. I did not even know whether I should ever see you again. Indeed, I had just been wondering— But, oh no ; of course I was not vexed,’ said Sybil, breaking off in her answer rather confusedly. What had she been going to confess ? Gareth did not ask her.

‘I am glad you are not,’ he said, gently, ‘for it was a great pleasure for me to meet you ; and, perhaps, as I see we are going in the same direction, you will not mind my walking a little way with you, will you ?’

Sybil was rather startled ; but she had not the courage to say no. It might not be quite right ; but what was she to do ? She had no right to order him to take another path because he happened to be going her way ; and then it was so pleasant to see him at her side again. He took his place there without further permission ; and by-and-by he said,—

‘Where do you think I was dining last night ?’

‘With the Jacobsons ?’

‘No, with someone much nearer to you ; with perhaps the most fortunate man in the world—to my thinking, at anyrate—Mr Ashleigh.’

He said the name looking full at her, in order to judge of its effect, and to his annoyance she certainly coloured. There was even a little eagerness, restrained by natural modesty, in her manner, as she answered,—

‘With *Mr Ashleigh* ? Were you ? I am glad. I—I did not think you knew him.’

‘Nor did I, until I met him at my worthy landlord’s the previous day. I had often heard of him, however.’

Sybil was silent. She was wondering how the two men had

got on together, and what Gareth thought of her *fianc \acute{e}* . She was aware that he knew that she was engaged. The fact had been alluded to at Birchwood ; and he had once apologised, for some complimentary speech to her, by saying,—

‘Don’t be offended. One may always speak the truth to married women ; and I suppose you appropriated ones almost count yourselves as the same. At anyrate, you needn’t care for the opinion of poor outsiders like me.’

Now, after a second, he added,—

‘I was glad to go : glad and vexed, both. I am interested in young Mr Ashleigh.’

Sybil glanced up at him with a kind of shy questioning.

‘Why were you vexed ? Didn’t you—like him ? I am sorry. Of course, I know that living always in the country, and—and being a clergyman and all that makes him not quite—not like you and some London men ; and he has queer ideas about things. I don’t understand them, but some people think they are right ; and he is very good to the poor people. I have wished that he knew you.’

‘She is *apologising* for him !’ said Gareth to himself. ‘No woman really in love with a man ever did that for him to another one. Understand him ? No, I don’t suppose she does in the least ; nor he her.’

Aloud he said,—

‘Thank you very much. But why should you think I don’t like him ? I assure you that I thought him a most estimable young fellow. I was jealous of him, of course ; envious, if you like. He certainly seems to me the most enviable man in the world, and I only hope he doesn’t take his blessings too coolly. In his place I’m afraid I should even find it difficult to appear to do so.’

‘Ah, Mr Ashleigh is not such an enthusiastic person as you ; besides, he may have troubles like other people as well,’ said Sybil, smiling ; but she could not help understanding what was the particular blessing alluded to, and wondering whether Lion did value it as he ought. Gareth had seemed to doubt his doing so.

Of course it was not many days before Lion found out that his late guest and his betrothed were known to one another. Gareth had no intention of concealing the fact ; and as they all met in the churchyard on the following Sunday, it became at once apparent. Too much so, in fact ; for Lion was both astonished and annoyed, and took an early opportunity of asking

Sybil where on earth she had made acquaintance with 'that Bohemian fellow, Gareth Vane? He seems wonderfully at home with you !' and though Sybil's explanation was of course all that could be wished, the annoyance did not die out. She had blushed deeply while answering, and her tone had something of offence in its accent. Perhaps Lion's, on the other hand, had been too sultan-like; but he had been startled by the palpable air of intimacy in Gareth's whole manner and bearing towards his *fiancée*; and the knowledge that the former was a chum of Matt Jacobson, and that the intimacy had begun under that individual's roof, did not tend to increase his liking for the owners of Birchwood or their friends. He was heartily sorry Sybil had ever gone to the house; yet when all was told she had said nothing of the flowers or poems, nor of the walk across the heath, and the fact (which she was already regretting), that she had allowed her companion in that excursion to elicit from her that she generally took the same pilgrimage on Wednesdays and alone: Jenny being engaged that morning in wrestling with the difficulties of the Spanish language, a study into which she had thrown herself of late with much energy.

Poor Sybil! she had felt she was doing wrong when she made the admission; felt only too keenly that both her mother and sister; nay, even light-hearted Adelaide Ashleigh, would have been utterly shocked at the idea of her doing so; but somehow Gareth put his questions in such a way that it would have seemed almost impossible to leave them unanswered without being discourteous or unkind; and it was already growing so difficult to be unkind to him that she had not the heart to try it. Besides, she only told the truth; and why need she suppose he would take advantage of it? Still, the words were hardly out of her lips before she repented them; and not for worlds would she have had Lion aware of her imprudence.

If he remained in ignorance of it, however, there were two other people who had watched her walk across the heath with curious and condemning eyes, and of whom she never thought; Isac Jowl the herb-seller, and a tall, grave-looking middle-aged gentleman who, having alighted at Chadleigh Station (which was situated nearly a mile from the village itself), had strayed from the path in crossing the heath, and descrying the herbalist's ruinous cottage in the distance, had made for it in order to ask his whereabouts. Finding old Isac dawdling in his garden he asked a little more.

‘It’s not much of a place for size, Chadleigh End, is it?’

‘Eh, noa, not to-day ; but ‘tis growin’ ivery hour. I remembers it nowt but the park wi’ a whean cottages round, an’ one or two gentry’s houses scattered about like. ‘Twas a decent place then ; but now theer’s villases, and cottage-ornys, an’ lodges, all filled up with fine second-rate kind o’ folk enough to make yer sick ; an’ young skipjacks o’ doctors to look after ‘em ; nor not content wi’ that neither, but pokin’ their noses into the poor people’s ‘ouses as well, an’ robbin’ honest men o’ theer bread.’

The tall gentleman laughed, glancing upwards at the board over Mr Jowl’s doorway.

‘Ah, you belong to the unlicensed fraternity,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘I don’t wonder you have a grudge against your supplanters. And so there are a good many villas about here. Do you know if there are any to let? There’s a place called —let me see—ah! Hillbrow, which was once recommended to me, but I fancy it’s not empty at present.’

‘Then yer fancy’s right. ‘Tis a widder lady lives theer wi’ her two gals, an’ has done this ten year. Pretty gals they be. Theer’s one o’ them gone past a moment back wi’ a young man. I were lookin’ at ‘em when you come by. He, he, he! ‘twere a treat to see ‘em, it were.’

‘You are fond of the young lady?’ suggested the stranger, pleasantly ; but was snubbed with decision.

‘No, I bean’t. ‘Tis a stuck up, pink an’ white doll ; an’ her mother turned away a servant gal onst fur just coming ‘ere to consult me, the venomous old hag. But ‘taint fur that reason I’m fain an’ glad to see the lass theer, but because she’s engaged to be married to the man as put ‘er mother up to ‘er spitefulness, the parson here, as imperdent, highflyin’ dogmatical a young jackanapes as ever you see ; and—he, he, he! you look at ‘em yourself. Theer they go. Now, shouldn’t you say they wos lovyers by the sight on ‘em?’

The gentleman looked out as directed. Gareth and Sybil were still in sight, the former’s tall graceful figure, and shapely head slightly bent over his companion, very noticeable too on that broad, furze-covered expanse. Sybil was on his other side. You could not see much of her beyond a pale-blue parasol and dress. The stranger’s violent start had no reference to her.

‘That is not a clergyman,’ he said, sharply ; and old Isac rubbed his wrinkled dirty hands together, and broke into a jeering laugh.

‘Noa, sir, it ain’t, an’ that’s the foon of it. ‘Tis a fast-livin’ yoong gent from Lunnon as is stayin’ at a farm’ouse near by, fur the sake o’ yoong miss, there, as I gather from one o’ the farm gals. Pretty thick too they seems, don’t they? an’ that’s not their first meetin’, as I could swear. I was under Box ’ill one day c’lectin’ yarbs when I see ‘em coming along together, he leadin’ ‘er ‘orse. She’d a bunch o’ flowers in ‘er buzzum, an’ ‘ad gived some on ‘em to him, an’ he was puttin’ on ‘em in ‘is. He! but Muster Parson ’ll have his comb cut fine an’ short when he finds ‘isself jilted an’ his young ooman gone off wi’ another party. He’ll not crow quite so loud then, eh, sir, what d’you think?’

‘I think he has certainly cause for jealousy at present, and that I must be going on. Good-day to you, friend,’ said the stranger; but though he suited the action to the word, he paused before he had gone many steps, and again looked after the two figures, now barely visible in the distance, with gravely thoughtful eyes.

‘After all,’ he said to himself, ‘it was for these selfish girls and their selfish, cruel mother that my poor hapless darling was cast upon the world. Why should I interfere to save her? I only wish it were not Helen’s brother. I suppose it is retributive. But she must be a fickle, good-for-nothing girl anyhow.’

Some other people began to say the same of poor Sybil about them. Of all places in the world where it is impossible to keep anything, however trifling, to yourself, and where scandal is the staple food and daily delight, give me a country village within easy reach of London; and perhaps old Jowl’s intimacy with the ‘servant-gal’ community was prejudicial to Miss Dysart in more houses than people who don’t listen to backstairs gossip could easily believe.

Perhaps, too, Mrs Jacobson had been imprudent in jesting about her wild friend Mr Vane’s passion for his ‘lily maid.’ She let her tongue run on about it somewhat freely at the De Boonyens’ one day; and Mrs De Boonyen listened greedily, and next day drove off in state, bearing Horatia Maude with her, to call at Dilworth Rectory, where, having veiled her triumph under a grave show of commiseration, she dropped so many hints about the deplorable laxity and imprudence of ‘some’ young ladies, and about Mrs Dysart’s way of bringing up girls never having been the same as hers, that when she was gone, the rector’s wife indulged in one of the heartiest

laughs she had enjoyed for some time, and told her husband that Lion ought to be vain.

‘Fancy, those dear De Boonyens haven’t given up all hopes of him yet. I suppose it is that devoted mother’s last effort before his marriage, poor fellow ! but she positively brought her unfortunate little girl here to-day decked out in all her smartest clothes, and looking more miserable and hideous than usual, and sat abusing our Hillbrow girls, and gazing at her own offspring with a “look on this picture and on that” air which was almost pathetic and Hamlet-like. My dear, did we hunt the young men down quite so pertinaciously in our young days ?’

At that moment Jenny Dysart was putting the finishing touches to the dress Sybil was to wear at a party they were both going to that night at Squire Chawler’s. Their mother was not able to go with them : but Mrs Chawler had promised to chaperon the girls herself if they were allowed to come ; and the dance having been given partly as a farewell to Lionel’s bachelorhood, it would have been churlish to refuse. But as Sybil stood by watching her sister’s nimble fingers as they draped a fold here, or inserted a flower there, there was an unwonted cloud on her brow, and a brilliancy in her eyes which she could not dispel. Only the previous day she had met Mrs Jacobson, who had told her that she was going to the party and was taking Gareth with her. ‘When he heard *you* were going he never gave me any rest till I got him an invitation,’ said the giddy-tongued little lady ; and though Sybil had sufficient dignity to draw herself up and look the displeasure she could not feel at the insinuating whisper, her heart beat fast even now when she thought of it.

It beat faster still when in company with Jenny she entered Mrs Chawler’s drawing-room some three hours later, and saw Gareth looking handsomer than ever, and leaning against a doorway—not dancing, but with a wearied, impatient expression, as if he were waiting for someone. She was glad that the joint greetings of her hostess and Lion obliged her to look away ; but through them all she felt that he had seen her and was only waiting till she was free.

CHAPTER V.

UNTER DEN LINDEN.

‘At last you are here !’ said Gareth, as he came to meet her. ‘I had begun to think you were not coming, and was meditating going away myself. I am glad I was not so hasty.’

He had got into the habit of speaking to her in this tone. It was a frequent one of his with women—and probably he knew where it was safe to use it, for few of them resented it ; but no one outside her own home party had ever so addressed Sybil Dysart before, and her cheeks flamed up in answer to it. She looked round in half-apprehension lest Jenny might have heard, and answered him reprovingly.

‘We are not very late, I think ; and, Mr Vane, you ought not to talk in that way. What difference could our coming make in your staying or going ?’

‘Just the difference that you know it would. If you had not come I should certainly have gone. What do you suppose I came to this ball for ?’

Sybil looked up at him, blushing still.

‘To dance, I suppose,’ she said, trying to speak as gravely as before, but smiling a little in spite of herself. ‘Is not that what one generally comes to a ball for ?’ and he smiled too, a smile which made her rosier than ever.

‘Quite right. To dance with you. Certainly not with anyone else. And now will you give me this waltz ? Let me see your card.’

He took it from her as he spoke, slipping it off her delicate little wrist with a touch too quick and light to be prevented ; and, indeed, Sybil made no effort to do so. She was beginning to feel that it was all wrong somehow, that she had no right to allow Gareth to speak to her in this manner, and to possess himself of her property, writing his name at various places on it as coolly as if both it and she were his own to do with as he pleased. She felt, too, that Lionel would be displeased if he knew of it ; but she made no effort to assert herself, notwithstanding ; or if she did, one look from Gareth’s eyes was sufficient to melt it all away. She had only met him a dozen times in all ; and yet the strange influence which he had over her made her feel in his presence as though she had no will of her own to assert, and must needs do as he wished whatever that wish might lead

to. It was like a kind of dream, a foolish, dangerous dream—but ah! such a pleasant one; and, after all, the awakening would come soon, and she should never see him again.

Lion would have all the rest of her life, and she was not even robbing him of anything now. She was not doing anything wrong. He had liked to dance with her himself in his anteclerical days; and how could she prevent other people from doing so now? She had not altered since then. Nevertheless, down in her heart, she knew that it was not right.

‘How grave you are looking to-night!’ said Gareth, as he came up to her later in the evening to claim one of the dances he had marked as his own. ‘What were you thinking of just now? That you would rather have danced this with Mr Ashleigh, and that I have forestalled him? But that was his fault. Do you think *I* would let any man forestall me in a thing I cared for? Besides, I am only here for such a little while. You need not grudge it me.’

Such a little while! Why did Sybil’s heart sink so absurdly at the words, when they were but the echo of her own thoughts a few moments back? Yet she tried to answer gaily.

‘I don’t grudge it you; and Mr Ashleigh did not want this. He does not dance round dances since he has been a clergyman. When I keep one for him, as I do sometimes, we talk it out—we don’t dance; but he is much too unselfish to prevent my doing so with other people.’

‘He is a saint,’ said Gareth, with a sneer which he could not repress; ‘I am not; and if you were engaged to me—you needn’t blush so; you are quite bewitching enough as it is, and I know how ridiculous the supposition sounds—but if you were engaged to me, I would not let any other living man dance with you; and no church or clergy or anything else should prevent me from doing so myself. I admire the greater coolness of Mr Ashleigh’s blood intensely; but I am not a humbug, you see. In his place I could no more emulate than fly.’

‘But, indeed, he is quite right,’ said Sybil earnestly. She was feeling more than ever that this was all wrong, and it was a comfort to her to be able to stand up for Lion. ‘It is not that he thinks there would be any harm in his dancing; but that his parishioners would be scandalised by it; and he is so much too broad for them in other things, that he does not mind giving up a trifle like this which only affects his own pleasure. Yes, I think he is better than you,’ and she looked up, trying to speak playfully, ‘for I assure you he used to be

very fond of waltzing ; and as he knows I am too, he would never be unkind enough to prevent me doing it just because I belonged to him.'

'And I would,' said Gareth, in a low voice. He had put his arm round her waist and was whirling her round the room in those long, smooth circles which made dancing with him so easy, and whose gliding, swaying motion never interfered with speech as other men's dancing did. His head was bent over hers too, so that she could hear his murmured words quite distinctly ; though the music sweeping round them like a song-wind rendered them inaudible to everyone else.

'Do you think if a woman belonged to me, a woman I loved as I should love her, that I could bear to see her in another man's arms as I hold you now, and as a dozen others will hold you before the evening is over ? Not that I would be "unkind," as you call it. I would not prevent her from dancing with the whole world if she wished to do so ; but I don't know—I fancy somehow'—his eyes resting on the fair, flushed face as it almost touched his shoulder—"that she would not wish it. What do you think, Miss Dysart ?'

They had paused for a moment to gather breath, and she was standing, leaning on his arm, in the embrasure of a window. The pathetic music of the 'Sweethearts' waltz still swelled over every sound ; and the dancers whirled past them like a cloud of snowflakes in a fairy pantomime, white and rose and gold-coloured. Sybil felt a swift, keen pain at her heart. Did he think her wrong to dance then ? There were actual tears in her eyes, though she did not know it, as she looked up and asked him,—

'Are you engaged, Mr Vane ?'

'For what ?'

'To be married. You talk as though you were ; and—but perhaps I ought not to ask you.'

'There is nothing you ought not to ask or that I would not answer ; yet I should have thought you knew the reply to that. No, I am not engaged to be married, Miss Dysart. What made you think so ?'

'You talked as if—as if there were someone for whom you cared very much and who cared for you.'

'There is someone for whom I care very much—more than I have ever cared for anyone before ; more than I care for anything on this earth or beyond it ; but she does not care for me. I am nothing to her, less than nothing. If it were not so—'

He broke off abruptly, leaving the sentence unfinished ; but there was something so bitter and hopeless in his tone that it made that new, unaccountable pain at Sybil's heart keener than before, and her sweet eyes were full of involuntary sympathy as they met his.

'Mr Vane, I am so sorry. I wish I had not asked you,' she said, gently. 'I think she ought to care for you ; but—but if she did—' the uneasy feeling for a few moments back returning to her and making her hesitate.

'Yes, if she did ?' he put in, laying his hand for a second on the one which rested on his arm, as if to encourage her to go on.

'Should you think less of her if she liked to dance with other people ?'

'No, decidedly.'

'But—'

'Well, I know what you mean, Miss Dysart ; you may laugh at me if you please, you who have just made me own that I love a woman who cares nothing for me, and to whom I am no more than a passing acquaintance ; but that is simply my luck in life, the luck I have been cursed with ever since I was born. Still, if it were different, if this woman,' again touching the little hand with the momentary caress of a finger-tip, 'loved me, could love me at all, I would try and make her do it so well that she could not bear to dance with anyone else except me : so well that by her own free will I should hold her as mine and mine only : a thing too precious for the gaze or touch of other men to so much as rest on.'

Sybil's gaze had grown dreamy. *This* was love, then ! She had never understood it before ; yet it did not seem unreasonable to her—from him. Only (the unsatisfied doubt still tormenting her) if he felt so, what must he think of *her* love and her. Involuntarily her face paled and saddened and her lips quivered.

'Then do you think—' she paused timidly to steady her voice, and the sentence altered itself. 'If you think so, I ought not to dance with you. I ought not to dance with anyone.'

Gareth looked down at her, a swift searching glance, as if to see whether she spoke in sarcasm ; but the innocent trouble in her face answered him without words. She went on more quickly, though still very timidly,—

'Indeed, I think if you feel so you should not have asked me. I never thought of it in that way ; and Lion—Mr Ashleigh does

not. I am sure he does not. He likes to see me dance, he has often said so. He does not feel as you do.'

'You are right; he does not feel as I do, and he could not, if he tried,' said Gareth bitterly; 'but why do you talk as if I were blaming you? I am not Mr Ashleigh. The woman who loved me would do and like what I liked through the very power of her love. How can you do better than as he likes? And as to not asking you to dance; if asking could keep you from dancing with anyone else, and make you dance with me as often as I wished—' Someone pressed up against them, and he broke off abruptly and was silent; but there was something in the tightening of his arm as he put it round her and whirled her away again which finished his sentence without any words.

They did not stop or speak again till the cessation of the music brought the dance to a close; but one or two people noted the rapt excited face of the handsome Bohemian, and the almost painful flush on Sybil's usually pearl-like cheek; noted, too, the way in which, when the waltz was over, he kept her on his arm, not speaking to her even then, but with an air as though he were guarding her from everyone else; and Jenny, who had been dancing with William Ashleigh, just then at home on leave, heard a jesting word of comment on the pair, and turned first pale and then scarlet with wounded pride and anger. She was restless till she could see her sister for herself, to know what the remark meant, and when she did, there was something in the dreamy, far-away happiness on Sybil's face which made her uneasy without knowing why. She got near her as soon as she could, and whispered,—

'Are you tired, dear? You look as if you were.'

'I? No; oh no,' said Sybil, smiling, though in the same dreamy way, and Gareth's brow slightly darkened. He could not bear Jenny, and seemed to guess her motive in seeking her sister. That tall, slight figure, like a young palm-tree beside a birch, had an air of protection over the elder sister which irritated him; and he met the pure, grave youthfulness of her face with an almost angry look.

'If you feel the heat, Miss Dysart, come into the hall, it is cooler there,' he said, addressing Sybil; and just then another dance-tune struck up, and a friend of William Ashleigh's, whom he had already introduced to her, came to claim Jenny as his partner. She still lingered for a moment, however.

'If you are not engaged for the dance, Sybil, do you mind

going to speak to Mrs Cunningham? She is just over there, and has a message for you from Adelaide. The Cunninghams saw her several times in London.'

Gareth looked down into Sybil's fair, flushed face.

'Are you engaged for this dance?' he asked, gently, as Jenny was borne off. 'I suppose I may not ask you for it. Mrs Grundy's well-known Mormon principles' (with a sneer) 'would be shocked at your dancing twice running with the same man; but are you engaged to anyone else?'

The flush mounted higher in Sybil's cheek. She was engaged, and a moment back, if anyone had asked her the question, she would have said so without hesitation, and would have felt astonished and a little indignant if her expected cavalier had not made his appearance promptly. Now, however, something in Gareth's tone, quiet as it was, some inflection so slight that no ear could have caught it if the heart had not been tuned to the same key, made her long most unreasonably to answer in the negative. She did not ask herself whence the impulse came, or what it implied. She only felt somehow as though she never wished to dance with anyone again; and she almost hated the eager red-faced little man who was even then trying to make his way to her in the crowd. The reluctance in her eyes as she lifted them to Gareth's was plain enough to him. He felt his pulses beating faster as she answered,—

'Yes—to Major Graham. He asked me when I met him in the hall; and I could not refuse. I wish—'

'Do you mean you wish you had not done so, that you would rather not dance it?'

The interruption came almost in a whisper; but there was no mistaking the earnestness of it. Sybil was still looking into his eyes, and again hers spoke for her before her lips.

'You are sure?'

'Yes, quite.' This time she said it quickly, for Major Graham was coming near; though as yet he had not seen her. 'I—Jenny was right—I am tired after all. I would rather rest.'

'Then most decidedly you shall. Stay, come out here from the crush. The air will refresh you, and you can't be so easily followed and persecuted.'

They were standing close to an open French window; and as he spoke he stepped across the threshold, drawing her with him, and led her on to the terrace without. The moonlight was lying white on it, and touching the rounded tops of the trees

and the river flowing at the bottom of the garden with molten silver. The warm air was faint with the scent of flowers and of new-mown hay from the meadows at the back of the house. A big moth flew by brushing the soft silence of its wings against Sybil's cheek, and making her shrink a little closer to her companion ; and the first notes of the dance floated out through the long row of open windows, and hushed the murmur of the tongues within.

Gareth caught up a little shawl which was lying on one of the chairs scattered about over the terrace, and threw it over Sybil's shoulders.

'If you stand there Major Graham will spy you out in another minute and pursue you,' he said, playfully. 'Come down into the garden ; it will be cooler there, as I see two or three other people have had the sense to find out already. What a perfect night it is, and how pretty that girl's white figure looks through the trees !' He spoke gaily, so as to silence any scruple she might have, and it had the desired effect. She hesitated for a second with the thought of Mrs Cunningham in mind, and that perhaps Lionel might wonder at her absence ; but the air felt so sweet and fresh after the crowded rooms ; and besides, if other people had already wandered out into the gardens, what harm could there be in her doing the same ?

'Only we must not stay long,' she said ; and Gareth took the implied consent, and let the proviso pass by. The pleasures of life were the matters most important to him. Their conditions he generally put on one side. He had never felt better satisfied than now, and in the fulness of his content began to talk to her of other things, of summer ramblings in Greece, and happy days beside the blue waves of the Adriatic Sea, chaining her attention with jest and anecdote and reminiscence while he deftly led her from one winding flower-fringed walk to another, till they had left the house and the other wandering couples far behind ; and only a few stray notes of the music came now and then like a melodious tremble on the breeze to them, and filled up the breaks in the song of a nightingale hidden in the thick-leaved boughs overhead. Sybil stopped suddenly and looked back.

'Ought we not to turn ?' she said, rather timidly, and making a motion as though to draw her hand from his arm ; but Gareth would not let it go.

'We are close to the water,' he answered. 'Let us go on and have a look at it. It would be a shame to turn back without

doing so. See there, through the boughs, the gleaming of the moonbeams on it, and who ever dreamt of anything sweeter than the scent of these limes?’

Not Sybil, at any rate. It seemed to her as if all nature were steeped in sweetness at that moment; such a sweetness as she might have felt in dreams before, but never when awake, and she dreaded awakening from it now. They were at the entrance of an avenue of lime-trees in full flower, the emerald foliage, pierced here and there by a silver rain of moonlight, forming a closely-woven arch overhead and girdling the knotted roots with a living wreath of verdure, sprinkled here and there with argent fire. She let him lead her along it till they came to a bend in the path where the trees on one side made a break so as to allow for a low stone parapet overlooking the cool depths of the river Mole below.

On the opposite side of it the banks were steep and sharp, and wooded densely to the summit, purple-black against a sapphire sky. The water beneath them looked of an ebon blackness too, deep, transparent, and mysterious, with—far away in the shadowest corner—one white swan floating in the darkness like a spirit bird. To the right, however, the river took a sudden curve, and from a break in the overhanging woods above the climbing moon shed down on it a flood of crystal light, pure and white and glittering as a shower of diamonds. They two, standing there in the soft and fragrant shadow, looked out upon it, not speaking nor moving; both too content with the utter beauty of things to care for more than the mere enjoyment of them. One of Sybil’s hands still rested on Gareth’s arm, the other, white and slender as a snowflake, she had laid on the worn grey stones of the parapet. Her fair, small head, the waving locks closely bound with a thick wreath of honeysuckle, was bent rather forward, gazing down the stream. The shawl had partly fallen from her, leaving one shoulder, round and fair as any carven pearl, bare in the mystic, shimmery half-light. She had another great bunch of honeysuckle in her bosom, shedding out a sweet and subtle perfume from its rose and cream-coloured tusks, and the soft folds of her saffron-tinted gown were fastened at her waist by a slender golden girdle. Gareth could not take his eyes off her, off the delicate, exquisite curve of arm and neck, the softly-curling locks about the temples, and dreamy far-away gaze, even the dimple, planted just where the rose-flush warmed the soft outline of her cheek. She was so near him that his shoulder almost touched hers; and

he half wondered that she did not feel the fierce beating of his heart against the little hand which rested so trustingly on his arm ; that she did not start when gently, gently he crossed his other above it so that his right hand covered and closed upon hers, though with a touch so cautious it would scarce have scared a butterfly.

‘Sybil !’ he said.

She did start now. He had hardly spoken above a whisper ; but he felt the quick flutter at her pulse as she drew herself suddenly erect with the air of one wakened from some happy dream, and looked up at him with a quick, half-frightened glance, conscious that something had been said, though what she did not know.

‘Ought we not to go back ?’ she said, flutteringly. ‘I was forgetting, it is so lovely here ; but is it not late ? Mr Vane, we must go.’

‘Not just yet.’ He spoke in the same tone, the pressure of his hand strengthening on hers as she tried to draw herself away. ‘Why should we ? Are you in a hurry to return to that stifling, crowded room ? Surely it is sweeter here, unless—’ And then, as she did not answer, his voice altered suddenly, and he dropped her hand, moving away from her as he added, in a sharp, raised key, ‘Sweeter for *me*, perhaps you’ll say, however ! Ay, you’re right too. Sweet and selfish both. I had forgotten your partners, who are probably becoming frantic for you by this time, and your own natural impatience to return to them. How disgusted you must have been feeling at my obtuseness !’

‘Indeed, no,’ she said, looking up at him with a world of guileless pleading in her sweet blue-grey eyes. She was overwrought, and the fierce change in his voice and manner frightened her : her lip quivered like a scolded child. She felt as if suddenly left to herself, standing there away from him. ‘I was not thinking of them. I would far rather be here if they were all—’

‘What is “all,” then ? Is it your lover you are thinking of ? Surely he is not so jealous that he cannot spare you for half-an-hour when he can have you every other day, and all day if he pleases. Forgive me, though,’ as he saw a conscious flush rise, and mantle in her cheeks. ‘I will take you back to him this minute if you wish it. *Do* you ? Tell me.’

He had taken her hand again as he asked it, and was looking in her face. The dark, brown river below leapt up with a little rippling laugh. The climbing moon, mounting higher and

higher above the trees, sent down broken *reflets* of light through the fragrant lime boughs upon her saffron gown, the rounded curves of waist and limb, the shy, reluctant trouble in her sweet young face.

‘He does not want me. He is never jealous. Do not talk about him so, please.’

‘Forget him then for just five minutes more, and give those minutes to me. Only five minutes! It is not much out of your life: not too much to ask, is it?’

‘Five minutes? No.’

‘Five minutes then.’

And as he spoke he let her go, and they stood side by side again, silent as before, his eyes on her; hers, full of a strange dawning fear and trouble, wandering vaguely over the dark woods and moonlit stream. She was conscious that his gaze was on her now; conscious that, let her return when she might, it could never be to the old life, the old tranquil feelings. All of a sudden a river broader than that beneath her seemed to have opened between her and them; and from across it the faces of her mother and Jenny gazed at her with pale, reproachful horror. She felt as if she were on the edge of a precipice, as if a breath would send her headlong down it. Not two minutes of the five had passed when she turned and faced Gareth, flushing and trembling from head to foot.

‘Please let me go now. I must go back. Indeed I must.’

The brown water leapt up with the same low, shrill laugh. The climbing moon, mounting higher and higher above the trees, let one long shaft of silver light fall like a sword athwart the distressed quiver on her brow, the liquid, pitiful eyes, the honeysuckles on her breast rising and falling with the rapid beating of her heart, the roses dying out of her cheeks and lips as she spoke. He had been going to remonstrate, but the sight of her agitation checked him.

‘You are cold,’ he said, quickly. ‘What a brute I was not to see it sooner, and the dews falling on this little head all the time! Good heaven! if I have made you ill, shall I ever forgive myself!’

He caught up the light knitted shawl she wore as he spoke and wrapped it closely round her head and neck. His fingers touched her hair softly and lingered for one moment under her dainty chin as he knotted the fleecy folds beneath it with anxious care. Only a touch, but enough to send the rich blood mantling into her face again and a sudden light into her eyes

such as had never shone there before, enough to make him cast the last remnants of honesty and prudence to the winds.

'My love!' he murmured, passionately—'my love that might have been, my only love now and always, Sybil!' and then he bent his face quickly upon hers and kissed her.

There was a man's step upon the gravel, a man's shadow long and black upon the moonlit path. Gareth had barely time to loose the girl and steady her trembling fingers upon his arm before someone came round the bend of the path: someone before whom Sybil shrank unmistakably and pitifully—Lionel Ashleigh!

'How little it takes for life to go wrong!
A word too much or a kiss too long—
There comes a mist and a driving rain,
And the world is never the same again.'

Gareth was no coward, but if he had been, that girlish confession of fear—appealing to, not from, him—would have made him brave. He drew her hand closer in his arm again, and faced her lover with a cool stare.

CHAPTER VI.

'IT IS THE LITTLE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE.'

JENNY had finished her dance and was seated by Mrs Chawler in a dutiful attitude which disguised some inward restlessness, when Lion came up from behind and touched her on the shoulder.

'Where is Sybil?' he said; and the girl turned round with a start, for there was something in his voice which seemed to strike a responsive chord in her own heart, and ring there as with a loud note of fear and apprehension. The eagerness of her answer had an apologetic tone in it.

'I don't quite know; somewhere in the garden, I think. It is so warm, you know, in here, and a great many people have gone out besides. See there!' and she pointed towards a corner of the terrace, where a big stand of dark-red azaleas only partly concealed the gleaming folds of some feminine dress. Lion's glance followed hers. He said, shortly,—

'That is not Sybil.'

'No ; but—but it is someone else. There are lots of people in the gardens just now. That last waltz was very heating.'

Poor Jenny was conscious of the extreme feebleness of the commencement of her reply, and was trying to improve on it ; but Lion did not seem to hear, and his face was so pale, his eyes wore such a strange expression, that Jenny, hardly knowing the reason why, found herself speaking confusedly, and with a kind of hurried deprecation, as though Sybil were somehow to blame, and she would fain excuse her.

'I was very nearly crushed in it myself,' she said, laughing. 'Look at my poor flowers !' But Lion did not look, and there was no smile on his face as he answered,—

'Your sister did not suffer from it at anyrate, seeing that she was out of the room both during it and the previous dance, and not to be found any more than she is now.'

'How do you mean, Lion ?'

'I mean that I looked for her. She was engaged to me for it.'

'What ! for one of your talk-waltzes ? She must have forgotten it then,' said Jenny quickly. 'How vexed she will be ! but everyone forgets sometimes. I do, I know. When one's card is full, one gets confused ; and Sybil's card is always full. You must make allowance for her popularity,' she added, looking up with a smile, which faded before the keen look which Lion's eyes sent down into hers.

'Her popularity cannot have been very confusing this evening,' he said, drily, 'for I do not think she has danced half-a-dozen times, and three of those, I know, have been with the same person.'

Jenny looked up at him, a crimson streak of colour in her cheek.

'Lion !' she said, her great eyes tremulous between entreaty and reproach. 'Surely you are not—'

'Jealous ?' he interrupted, bitterly. 'Is that what you were going to say ? No, not quite that ; but—but, Jenny, people are talking of her—of Sybil ! I have heard one or two to-night laughing at her flirtation, as they call it. By heaven, I believe you have too !' for his eyes were still on her, and her face had grown suddenly scarlet ; yet she met his glance bravely.

'And if I had,' she said, 'I should have been above listening to them. Do not you know the worth of vulgar gossip ? Why, they would soil an angel here if they spoke of her ; and Sybil—'

'Sybil is no angel ; only an innocent girl,' said Lion gravely,

‘and a girl who may make a mistake, like any other, and never know of it till too late. Jenny, you were right, I am jealous ; not of this Mr Vane, or of any other man who may happen to monopolise her for an evening ; not of anybody, but for her, for Sybil herself. She belongs to me. Her mother has trusted her to me. She is my affianced wife, and I should be unworthy to possess her, or call myself her lover, if I were not jealous of every word or action which could call spiteful eyes or gossiping tongues upon her. It is not sufficient to defend her when she is blamed. Any clod who calls himself a man, and loves a woman, would do that for her. It is my duty to shield her from the very possibility of blame, and to stand between her innocence and those who would drag it down on her like this—’ He stopped for a moment with a fierce look in his eyes, which spoke no love for Gareth Vane, and which made Jenny shrink ; then added, in a quieter tone, ‘I am going to look for her now,’ and moving the girl gently on one side, passed out at the French window near which she was sitting, and went striding away across the dewy lawn, and along the winding, rose-hung, perfumed walks, startling more than one couple by the sudden apparition of his tall, dark figure with the Roman collar, and face set in a white mask of hardly repressed anger and anxiety.

He was right. More than one person had been talking of Sybil that night. It had not been possible for Gareth to absorb her in the way he had done without attracting the attention of such a talkative community, even if there had been no previous gossip on the subject ; and tongues, which might not have been set going had she been a disengaged young lady open to be wooed and won like others in the assemblage, wagged with increased and righteous venom when a damsel, known to have already secured the most eligible young clergyman in the neighbourhood for her own property, had not even the grace to be content with him but must needs appropriate into the bargain the handsomest man and the best dancer in the room. It was the De Boonyens who had set the ball rolling, and they kept it up. More severe things were said on this evening than had been spoken before ; and Lion, passing some of the gossips and smarting already under a slight feeling of mortification at not being able to find his *fiancée* for the dance she had promised him, heard the venomous words, and boiled over with indignation.

It was not Sybil he blamed. She might not mean any harm, might not have a disloyal thought to him. In his intense love and loyalty to her, he would not even glance at the possibility

of such an idea ; but what right had this man to monopolise her, and cause her to be talked about, and her fair name mocked at by those who were hardly worthy to mention it familiarly ? She, too, who had been so sheltered and guarded from the rough touch of the world that at one-and-twenty she was more like a beautiful innocent child than a young lady of the period. By heaven, he would not suffer it ! His darling had been entrusted to his protection as well as that of Mrs Chawler, and if the one did not avail her, the other should.

Yet, though he came prepared to exert it, I think the shock was even greater to him than to Sybil, when in the course of his search he came at last on her and Gareth in the lime-tree walk.

He did not see the kiss—the bend in the path prevented that—but he saw the close, lover-like position, the sudden start apart ; more than all, he saw his love's marked and unmistakable shrinking at his sight—shrink *from* him as if for shelter to the other man's side ; and the sight went like a knife to his heart, almost depriving him of speech or breath. For one fleeting moment, indeed, the truth flashed upon him in all its fickle, heartless cruelty ; but swiftly as it came he flung it from him, and stood at Sybil's side striving to force his face and voice into their wonted pleasantness as he spoke to her.

‘I was looking for you, Sybil,’ he said at once. ‘Did you forget that the last was my dance ? Let me take you back to the house.’

He offered her his arm as he spoke. It had not escaped him—that little gesture by which Gareth drew his closer against her hand as she pressed towards him—and the young clergyman's lips were white with the pain and wrath which he could not speak ; but he managed to keep his voice in good control ; and Sybil, dazed and reluctant as she looked, had no thought of disobeying. She would have taken her trembling fingers from Gareth's arm, if its tightening pressure had not held them there, and have gone with her lover at once. It was his right to summon her ; his right to be angry. She had been engaged to him for the dance after Major Graham's, and of course she had broken the engagement. She seemed to have broken many and most engagements during the last ten minutes. It was all a confused dream of bliss and fear and wrong-doing ; but she was awake now, and she would have obeyed and gone with him at once if she had been allowed.

Gareth, however, was in one of his most reckless moods. He was not used to suffering other men to take from him anything

that he chose to keep, whether it were his own or not ; and at the present moment the contemptuous ignoring of his existence by so much as a glance, combined with a certain amount of proprietorship in Lion's manner to Sybil, irritated him into sudden self-assertion. Perhaps also—for there is a golden thread in most life-skeins, however dark and tangled they may be on the whole—the involuntary pressure of that slender little figure against his side appealed, more forcibly than any scruples of prudence could withstand, to his tenderness and chivalry. He could not give her up. That light touch of his lips on her brow, cool and satin-smooth as the petal of a lily, seemed to have consecrated her to himself, and he kept her hand firmly in his arm as he spoke, ignoring Lion in his turn.

'Do you want to go back to the house, Miss Dysart ? This next dance is mine, I believe, whatever the last was ; and as it will commence almost immediately, it is hardly worth while for me to resign my care of you.'

That he meant to provoke a quarrel was evident from the unrepressed insolence and defiance in his manner ; and Sybil, who had never seen him in this mood, was terribly frightened ; while the dark flush which mounted to Lion's very temples showed that he was perfectly cognisant of his rival's intention. If he still restrained himself, it was from no thought of his 'cloth,' or of the scandal to his profession, but of something else, which, even if these had lost their power, would still have held their influence over him—the presence of a woman, and that woman the one he loved. A man may be driven to forget he is a clergyman ; he can hardly fail to remember he is a gentleman ; and that remembrance stood Lion in stead now. At that moment he was in such a passion that he could have taken Gareth by the throat and throttled him without the smallest compunction. It was the thought of Sybil which controlled him ; the weakness of her womanhood, and the sense that it would be lowering to her if he let himself be dragged into a quarrel with another man in her presence. His voice was studiously courteous as he answered,—

'I am sorry to have to take Miss Dysart away ; but I only come as a messenger from her sister. It is she who wants you, Sybil. Will you let me take you to her ?'

He came nearer to her as he spoke, and Sybil found it impossible to resist ; indeed, she had no desire to do so. Gareth's active antagonism had set her trembling all over ; and unable to gauge Lion's character as it deserved, she was afraid of his

retaliating in kind, and felt, only too acutely, that she was not sufficiently guiltless to be able to act as mediatrix in a dispute between the two men.

Belle Beverley, it is true, and other women of her stamp, would have had no scruples on that score, and, detected in a small infidelity, would have been quite equal to the occasion, either assuming an air of injured innocence, or even taking the aggressive line, and reproaching their lover for having neglected to seek them for so long; but poor little Sybil was neither bad enough nor clever enough for this. She was not bad at all; only weak, and just now very frightened and unhappy. She detached her fingers from Gareth's arm and laid them on Lion's before the former could prevent her, if indeed he had any intention of persisting in doing so, and spoke hurriedly, with a pitiful appeal in her blue eyes which made the man she was leaving, and he who owned her, equally bitter at heart.

'Is Jenny looking for me? I will go to her directly. I only came out because—because it was so hot, and I did not hear your waltz begin. I am very sorry.'

Gareth turned sharply away. It was more than he could bear to hear that quiver in her voice, and know that it was an appeal to another man's indulgence, and that he had no right to resent it.

'I shall find you inside then, Miss Dysart, as soon as our dance commences. Your sister will have done with you by then, I hope,' he said, defiantly, and went away and left them.

Poor Sybil was shivering from head to foot; and Lion, left alone with her, let his eyes rest on her with a depth of sorrowful questioning which must have touched her, could she have met them. Through every pulse and limb he could feel the quivering in hers so near him, though the little hand which rested on his arm touched it scarcely more heavily than a rose-leaf; and the sensation filled him with a pain almost too keen for speech. That she should tremble at being left with him implied absolute fear of him, her lover, who had never opened his lips to her except in tenderness and affection. What, in heaven's name, could have caused it? It was with an effort, which made his voice sound cold and harsh, that he addressed her.

'Is it true that you are engaged to Mr Vane for the next dance, Sybil?'

Sybil hesitated.

'I—I hardly remember,' she stammered, 'but if he said so, I suppose—Indeed, Lion, I did not mean to break my engagement to you for the last.'

'Probably not,' he said, with a slight compression of the lips. 'I never supposed you did. I am going to ask you, however, to break your present one with Mr Vane, and not to dance with him again this evening.'

'Lionel!' Her fair, pale face had grown suddenly scarlet, and she made a movement to withdraw her hand from his arm: but there was no indignation in her tone—he wished there had been—only apprehension and appeal; and the consciousness that it was so made his tone harden.

'I do not believe for a moment that you would wilfully flirt with anyone. Apart from your caring for me, I am sure that you would not descend to such a thing; but you have danced three or four times with this gentleman already; and there are people here who have remarked on it, and spoken of you and him together in a way which would have been very offensive for you to hear. I should not have mentioned it to you, but that, were I not to do so, and to leave you to provoke further comments by your ignorance of those already made, I might be obliged to resent them in your own behalf.'

It was rather a long speech, and it sounded longer from the forced deliberateness of his utterance; but Sybil did not speak, did not flame up as he still half-hoped she would; and he spoke again, this time in a sharper tone of remonstrance, as if begging her to defend herself.

'You must feel yourself that for a girl, who is so shortly going to become the wife of one man, to dance time after time with another, and that other a person of Mr Vane's character, and then to be found wandering about with him in solitary walks away from all the rest of the company, must look—Good heaven!' he cried out, appalled even by the sound of his own words, 'even in innocence I would never have believed it possible in you.'

For the first time Sybil lifted her head proudly and her eyes lightened.

'I do not know what there is against Mr Vane's character,' she said, warmly. 'Where is he worse than anyone else? I have not heard anything against him; and if I had, I should not listen to mere vulgar gossip: I should be above it.'

'What, you can stand up for *him*!' cried Lion, more deeply wounded at this exhibition of feeling for Gareth in one who

had lacked spirit for any defence of herself, than he had been before. 'Do you care for him so much then? I think it is time I did come forward to protect you from him, a worthless *rout* and libertine, whose boast is always to have some woman's name bandied about in connection with his own. Gossip, indeed! If you heard him talk among men you would not require to go to gossip for a knowledge of his character. Perhaps, however, you think—'

But Sybil had snatched her hand from his arm and burst into sudden tears; and her lover's mood softened on the moment.

'My dear, forgive me,' he said, laying his hand on her shoulder and trying to draw her back to him. 'Did I frighten you? Did I speak too bitterly? Indeed, I never meant to hurt you. Didn't I say I knew you were blameless; and that it was only through your innocence that that scamp had power to compromise you or make you talked about? Love, for pity's sake don't cry in that way, or I shall never forgive myself. Surely you know how I love and trust you,' and again he would have drawn her to him under the shadow of the lime-trees; but Sybil only shrank farther away, and her sobs sounded hysterical. He began to be afraid that someone might come that way and hear her distress; and it was a relief to him when after a moment or two she recovered herself enough to silence it; though she would not look up, or let him take her hand even then; and when again he begged her to forgive him, she only answered,—

'Please, let us go home. I would rather go home at once. I am not well; and—and Jenny won't mind.'

'That I am sure she will not,' said Lion eagerly. 'I will take you to her at once, and call the carriage. But, Sybil, are you really unwell, or is it only that I have upset you? My dearest, don't look away from me like that. Indeed, it was for your own sake,' pleaded the poor young fellow, stroking the fair averted head with a tender, caressing touch, which would have softened most women's hearts, however incensed against him; but though Sybil's eyes obstinately refused to meet his, and he felt her flinch and shiver under his touch, she was not incensed. The only thought in her mind was, 'If he knew all he would never speak to me so,' and the weight of shame and remorse it brought with it made her seem cruelly hard and sullen as she murmured,—

'Please, let me go. I am not angry, and you have a right to say anything you like to me; but not now—let me go now;'

and bitterly disappointed, he was compelled to hold his peace and allow her to hurry him back to the house. She would not re-enter the ballroom, however; and looking at her pale, tear-stained face, he had no desire to press it, but took her at once to the cloak-room, and left her there, without having been able to win one other word or look from her, while he went to seek for Jenny.

The music was still swelling and floating over the swift rush and tread of the dancers. The air was fragrant with the scent of roses and heliotrope. It wanted little more than six weeks to the time of his marriage, the day to which he had been looking forward through ten long, tranquil, blissful months; but there was no bliss or tranquillity in his heart at that moment. Was Sybil's love for him really wavering? or what—what had made her turn from him so strangely, so heartlessly? With all his love and trust in her, the question would smite upon him as he made his way among the dancers; and the handsome, mocking face of Gareth Vane rose up suddenly in answer to it, and passed him with a triumphant brightness in the blue, defiant eyes.

C H A P T E R V I I.

GARETH CONQUERS.

'I shall come and see you to-morrow,' were Lion's last words after putting the two girls into the fly which was to take them home. To Jenny he had simply said that her sister was tired and wanted to retire at once; and the girl started up and came away with him on the instant. She had two or three dance engagements yet unfulfilled, and was looking forward to the final 'Sir Roger' with good-natured William Ashleigh; but there was something in Lion's face which, even if it had not been Sybil who wanted her, would have prevented her from thinking of her own pleasures; and when they reached the cloak-room they found Sybil already wrapped in her cloak and sitting in a half-cowering attitude with such a white, miserable face that Jenny, greatly alarmed, flew to her, asking eagerly if she were ill, or if anything had happened to make her look so.

Sybil repulsed her, however. Nothing had happened, and nothing was the matter with her. She was only tired out and sleepy; and she stood up and hurried to the carriage, hardly

waiting for Lion to give her his arm, and burying herself in the darkest corner of the back seat, as if glad to find a refuge there. She did not say a word to him till Jenny was seated and he spoke as I have said, and then she leaned quickly forward, answering in a nervous hurry quite unlike herself,—

‘Not to-morrow; I—I shall be too tired—too tired to talk. The next day—any other time, but not to-morrow.’

‘Not to-morrow, certainly, if you do not wish it. The next day, then,’ Lion said, with proud composure; and then the fly drove off, and he was left standing on the steps.

For a moment he hesitated as if undetermined whether to re-enter the house or not; but a brief reflection decided him in the negative. His blood might run calmly enough in the general way, as Gareth said, but at the present moment he felt that it would be impossible for him to meet the latter gentleman without an open quarrel; and he dared not risk that with the knowledge that if he did, Sybil’s name must irretrievably be dragged into the question, and her fair report suffer in consequence of his hastiness. Whatever happened, his first duty was to shield her. There would be plenty of time to deal with Gareth Vane at another opportunity if he needed to be dealt with at all; but he must see Sybil first, and he still trusted to that interview for setting everything right. They had never had a quarrel yet, or a misunderstanding. Other lovers were always having little tiffs, and making them up again; but from the beginning of their engagement till now their love had flowed on in one smooth, unruffled stream, unmarred by even the most trifling bickerings or jealousies. Surely, surely this their very first quarrel was not to be a serious one—not to come between two whose affection for one another was so stable and deeply rooted: yet—if she would only have said one comforting word at parting!

He had been trying to console himself with the thoughts first quoted whilst putting on his hat and coat; but, try as he might, the last one would recur to him; and though he set out and deliberately walked the whole way home, in the hope that the physical exercise might tire out his mental doubts and questionings, and enable him to sleep when he got there, the hope was vain. As he lay on his bed the image of that graceful, girlish figure now clinging to Gareth Vane’s side, and anon standing before himself with face averted and fast-flowing tears, rose up before him, and filled his mind to the exclusion of all thoughts of rest; and when the sun rose he was still awake and murmuring to himself with dry, feverish lips,—

‘How shall I ever get through twenty-four hours or more of this? It will drive me distracted. Why—why would she not let me go to her to-day?’

He little thought that Sybil’s night had been even more weary in its wakefulness than his own. All the way home she had cowered up in the corner of the carriage, shivering from time to time, but not speaking, save by a curt negative to Jenny’s questions, till the young girl, debarred from active sympathy, but convinced that something must be seriously amiss, was fain to content herself with holding one of her sister’s chilly, nervously-clenched hands, and chafing it gently with her own warm fingers.

Sybil did not pull it away; she was both too gentle by nature and too much accustomed to Jenny’s petting to resent it; but neither did she show any pleasure or recognition of the caress, and as soon as ever they got to the house she hurried to her room, muttering something about being ‘fairly tired to death,’ and hardly waiting to say good-night to her mother, who as usual was sitting up for them.

‘The rooms were fearfully hot, and I have such a headache I can’t talk. If you’ll let me, mother, I’ll go to bed at once,’ she said, pleadingly; and there was an unwonted flush under her eyes and tremble in her voice which carried out her words, and made Jenny’s suggestion, that she was thoroughly overdone, appear the more likely—even in the eyes of Mrs Dysart, who was usually keen to see whatever was wrong. The mother shook her head at them both reprovingly, and sent them off to their rooms at once, declaring that she should not trust them to Mrs Chawler’s chaperonage again, and that they must tell her all about it in the morning.

But in the morning only one girl was visible. Sybil had been awake all night, tossing from side to side in a tumult of feeling, compounded of fright, shame, remorse, anxiety, and strange, bewildering, utterly incomprehensible happiness—a happiness which she could not disguise even from herself, and which even from its very novelty she dared not analyse, seeing that every guilty throb of it brought a corresponding pang of grief and humiliation. The morning found her utterly worn out, and when the maid came in with her hot water the poor child turned her face to the wall and begged that the blinds might not be drawn up. She wanted to sleep a little longer—and would Jane ask her mistress not to mind about keeping any breakfast for her?—she did not want any.

Of course that part of the message was not attended to ; for breakfast was kept for her, and was brought upstairs by Jenny a couple of hours later, all hot and tempting on a little covered tray ; and, much as Sybil loathed the sight of it, she dared not refuse it, or affect to go on sleeping, lest by doing so she should awaken suspicion, and bring down on her the very questioning she dreaded. She sat up, therefore, and drank her tea gratefully, and even tried to make a show of eating fried chicken and buttered toast ; while Mrs Dysart sat by the bed scolding her gently for first overheating herself with dancing and then going out into the night air ; and Jenny filled her cup and waited on her, saying less than usual, but with a tender, grave anxiety in her eyes, which Sybil found it more difficult to meet than her mother's fault-finding and remonstrances.

Just then, indeed, and knowing what they would think of her if they knew the truth, blame was really more pleasant to the girl's spirit than petting. It made her feel less hypocritical, and she owned with such frank contrition that she had been foolish, very foolish and imprudent, and promised so readily not to err in the same way again, that Mrs Dysart, who in her mind put down the garden folly to the temptation of a little sentimental ramble with Lion, was more than appeased ; and Jenny felt rebuked for the uneasy, half-suspicious feeling which had been tormenting her ever since she caught that expression on Lionel's face and in the tone of his voice as he bade them farewell. Suspicious of Sybil ! Her dear, gentle, innocent sister, with the blue limpid eyes and sweet child mouth—how was it possible to think ill of her or suspect her of any such thing as flirting or coquetry, unless one were utterly ignorant of her modest, guileless character ? Jenny went away feeling quite wicked and worldly, and condemning herself severely for her want of charity : and Mrs Dysart followed her, only pausing to give Sybil a kiss and say,—

‘ Now mind, child, you don't attempt to get up till after lunch. Your hands are feverish still, and another hour's nap will do your head good. When people have been naughty they must pay the penalty, and if Lion looks in in the afternoon, as I suppose he will, I shall lecture him well for not taking better care of you.’

But when she was left alone Sybil could not stay in bed any longer. The tea had refreshed her, and she sprang up, threw on her dressing-gown, and having locked the door, sat down to try and think more coolly over what had been done and said on

the previous night, and to prove to herself that she had not been so much to blame after all.

That wandering by the river, which Lion had seemed to take so seriously, might have been imprudent as regarded the night dews and damp ; but even her mother thought nothing of it in any other light ; and for the rest, what had she done that anyone could take hold of ?

Gareth indeed had sinned—sinned terribly ; but the sin was against her as much as against Lionel, for how could she possibly guess that he would do such a thing ? Yet, as the thought of what that thing was came back to her in all the gravity of its daylight aspect—of his kiss and the words which had been spoken with it, and of her tacit encouragement, both by continuing to stay with him when he had said so much, and by avoiding her dance with Major Graham—the scarlet colour rushed up to the very roots of her hair, and her head drooped lower and lower beneath a weight of shame and penitence. Of one thing she was quite certain—she could never see him (Gareth) again. Even were he to repent his offence, and behave himself so scrupulously for the future that neither she nor anyone else should ever be reminded of that luckless evening, she felt that it would be quite impossible ever to meet his eye or touch his hand again without some betrayal of her own weakness and his power. Oh ! why had he done it, and why had she been so weak as to let him ! What could he think of her himself, he who was wont to speak so lightly and mockingly of other women's virtue ? Did he try them all, and find them equally frail ? And now of course he would class her with the rest ; her to whom he had once said,—

‘Don't send me away from you. When I look at you and speak to you I feel as if I were a good man myself ; and then is the only time I do feel it. That is why Providence makes a few pure and losty women. The world would never get saved otherwise.’

Now she had come down from her lostness and soiled her purity. She had let him kiss her ! That kiss was burning into her brow now ; and yet she could not hate him for it. It had degraded her among women. It was a foul robbery from her lover ; but the pain of it which brought tears into her eyes was that *he* would think less of her for allowing it ; and she could not think less of him. It was wicked, daring, unpardonable ; but he loved her, and love pardons everything and covers everything. To be loved by him, as he could love ; loved spontane-

ously—nay, against all right and reason, and by such a nature, so fiery, so tender, so passionate ; it made her heart beat and her hands tremble and her eyes fill with a dreamy lustre to think of it. Only there was this penalty to be paid—she must never see him any more. He must go away and leave her ; leave her to feel as guilty and wretched as she must feel till time had taught her to forget all the joy and shame and wickedness of that summer-night's delirium ; and to blot out Lionel's suspicions by the submission and propriety of her future conduct. How much did Lionel suspect already, however ?—and had the two men met again ?

Lunch was barely over downstairs, and there was a sharp ring at the front bell. In her dread lest it should be her lover, regardless of his promise, and that she would be sent for to talk to him, Sybil finished dressing with frantic haste, and gliding down the back-stairs, astonished the cook by appearing in the kitchen with a very flushed and agitated face.

'I am going out for a turn, Martin,' she said, by way of explanation. 'There are visitors in the drawing-room, and my head aches so badly I don't feel as if I could talk to them. Please tell mamma so if she asks for me.' And then she passed out, and hastening through the farmyard, gained the highroad without further delay. She would far rather have gone down the garden and so into the meadow at the bottom ; but the drawing-room window looked out that way, and she might have been seen. As it was, someone else knocked at the front-door as she emerged from the side-gate, and she nearly retreated again in fear of discovery. The idea that this might be Lionel, however, gave her courage. Anything would be preferable to meeting him ; and before the servant could have answered the knock she had sped quickly across the road, and, turning off at once to the left, was on the common and out of sight.

It was a lovely day—one of those perfect June mornings when it seems almost impossible for any healthily-constituted mind to dwell upon things gloomy or dismal. A sky of pure turquoise blue, crossed and chequered and frayed by a fairy web of cloudlets white as wool and scattered like feathers over the azure plain, a light cool breeze fanning you in the face and shaking the petals from the wild-roses in the hedgerows ; air sweet with new-mown hay, and joyous with the laughter of children tumbling among the dry, fragrant heaps ; sunshine, mellow, pure and radiant, streaming down over the green meadows and growing, waving corn—

And stir of leaves and wings,
And run of rills and bubble of cool springs,
And hourly burst of pretty buds to flowers,
And buzz of happy bees in violet bowers;

the distant hills out Guildford way standing out a vivid purple against the stainless blue ; Epsom Grand Stand looking like a spot of glittering white above the dark bronzed green of the heath, and visible for miles away ; sheep, newly shorn, cropping the short sweet grass on the common, and seeming to enjoy the change from their close knotty jackets ; somewhere up in the blue empyrean a lark singing like an unseen voice thrilling through space, and 'stretched towards heaven as if from heaven her note she fetched : ' all the sounds and sights of a perfect June day blended in one harmonious whole. Sybil's way led across a heathy bit of common, covered over with great bunches of dark green gorse, spangled with golden apple-scented blossom ; and tiny pools of water, each one reflecting like a living jewel the patch of bright blue sky above and 'floating mountain of the silver cloud.' Her light feet went swiftly over the short green grass. The light waving locks of hair about her forehead fluttered in the breeze, and flicked away the tear-drops still glittering on her lashes. Sometimes her short flounced skirt, its white surface dotted over with pretty pink carnations, caught in the prickly furze-bushes and was twitted petulantly away ; sometimes she stumbled and nearly fell, from catching her foot in one of the numerous rabbit-holes tunnelling the ground ; but she never stopped or lingered, and indeed, in her restless haste might have come down on her face on one of these latter occasions, if someone crossing the heath at that moment had not made a quicker step forward and caught her by the arm.

'Miss Dysart,' cried Gareth Vane reproachfully, 'do you want to hurt yourself ? Where are you running to ? You would have had a nasty fall just then, if I hadn't happened to be near.'

Sybil stood still enough now. The soft elastic turf, which gave back no sound of footsteps, and her own intense pre-occupation, had prevented her from having an idea that anyone was following her ; and for the moment her self-possession utterly deserted her. That it should be *he* of all men, he whom she had half-resolved never to see again, certainly never to see except in the presence of others—he here ! The pink colour came and went in her cheek, and her eyes, blue as those summer pools at her feet, fixed themselves widely on him in almost terrified dismay, as she stammered out,—

‘Mr Vane, how did you come here? Did you see me? But you ought not to have followed me; indeed, you ought not.’

Gareth laughed lightly. He had never seen her so agitated. It made her lovelier than ever.

‘What an innocent little girl you are, Miss Dysart! Any other young lady but you would have pretended to consider my presence here as quite accidental and unconnected with herself, and I should have pretended the same, and we should have both known it was a humbug, and should have been quite comfortable and decorous over it. But you won’t let me be a humbug with you; you are too guileless yourself. Yes, I did follow you. I was anxious about you, you left the ball so suddenly last night; and I had just knocked at your door to inquire how you were, when I saw you scudding out of a side gate, and immediately determined to catch you up. You skimmed the ground so quickly, however, that it has been rather difficult to do so.’

Gareth said all this in his easiest manner, so as to give her time to recover herself, and adopt the same tone; but it did not produce the desired effect. She still stood making no effort to touch his outstretched hand; but with her own hands nervously pressed together, and the colour deepening in her fair face. There was a suspicious glimmer in her eyes as she answered him,—

‘I did not want to be caught up. I came out purposely because my head ached, and—and to avoid visitors. Mr Vane, please do not come any further with me. You are only going out of your own way; and—my mother would not like it.’

‘My way is your way,’ he said quickly, ‘unless—Sybil, do you mean that you wanted to avoid me? But no; you couldn’t be so cruel as to mean that. Tell me that you do not.’

The subtle mingling of pained reproach and pleading in his tone touched her. She had been very hard towards Lionel’s remonstrances last night. The accusing sorrow in his honest eyes had not woken a throb of tenderness in her; but this was quite different. Her heart was soft as melted wax to every word from Gareth Vane, and to hurt him wounded herself more. He could see the troubled softening in her face, and read his own power over her as he went on,—

‘Was it taking a liberty to call? I did not mean to ask to see you, only to hear how you were; and I could not keep away. I had been prowling round the house thinking of you for a couple of hours before I knocked; and then, when I saw

you, when you passed me, it was not in human nature to let you go by without a word. Where was the wrong in not doing so?

'I did not say it was wrong,' said Sybil, confused, but still unable to be anything but gentle. 'I am sure you would not mean to offend me. It was only—' And then in her wish that he would go away, and the impossibility of explaining, she began to walk on, adding in a low hurried tone, 'I could not have seen anyone to-day. My head was aching too much after last night, and—and you must know—'

'What?' asked Gareth. He had kept at her side, and now he stopped her, and tried to take one of her hands in his. 'Was it I who made your head ache?' he asked tenderly. 'For heaven's sake don't tell me that!—I, who would rather cut off my own than have pained you in the slightest. Sybil, say it was not I.'

For all reply she looked up at him, her eyes swimming in tears.

'Mr Vane, you ought not to call me by my Christian name. You ought not to speak to me at all, or to be here. Oh, don't ask me why! You *know*—you know as well as I do why.'

She was striving to free her hand from his grasp, but he held it tight, poisoning it, as well as its fellow, in a close pressure.

'Do you mean because I kissed you?' he said very low. 'Sybil, look at me. I will call you Sybil to-day, at all events, if never any more. Tell me, do you mean that?'

She was obliged to look at him for a moment, but her eyes fell instantly, and she answered,—

'Yes.'

'And you are angry with me for doing so? You feel that I insulted you? You wish never to see or speak to me again?'

She made no answer. I believe she tried to do so. It was only one word she had to say, after all; and what doubt could there be as to saying it? But something seemed to rise in her throat and choke her. She could not speak.

'Won't you answer me?' he asked gently. 'Or does your silence mean Yes? If it does, I will ask your pardon as humbly as you please, and go away at once. You need not be afraid of my troubling you any more in that case, for I shall know I have made a fool of myself. I shall have taken a pretty girl's coquetting for the answer of an angel's heart to mine, and been betrayed into a piece of madness for which you

may well mock at me. Well, it won't be the first time such a thing has happened in the world's history.

His tone had changed to a bitter ironical accent. It grated harshly on Sybil's timid soul, and roused her to self-defence.

'Mr Vane,' she said, 'you know I could not mock anyone; and—and when did I coquet with you?'

'I never said you coquetted with me: never believed you capable of such pettiness; but if a woman can act two utterly different parts within twenty-four hours, one must be false. Which is true of you, last night, or to-day?'

Had she been any other girl, she might have turned round on him and answered with reason that she had been taken by surprise the previous evening: that it was basely unfair to twit her with a weakness, which he had first tempted and then abused; but she had had very little experience of men of Gareth's stamp, very little experience of any man but Lion, whose wooing had been so reverent and self-restrained, whose ways were so different altogether: and it was this man she loved, she knew it now too well, not Lionel at all. Instead of replying, she tried once again to free her hands and looked up at him. Only a look; but one so innocently reproachful, so trusting, so plaintive in its shame and contrition, that it brought him to her feet at once. In that moment he felt that she was the one woman in the world to him, and that for her love, to gain possession of her, he would be willing to sacrifice all else, to change his very life, and become true and steadfast as he felt she would be to him.

'My darling,' he said passionately, 'forgive me! I had no right to speak to you so; no right to come into your presence, except to kneel at your feet and beg your pardon. Yet listen to me for one moment, Sybil. I was mad last night, I own it. I kissed you; and your lover, Mr Ashleigh, has a perfect right to call me out and shoot me for it this very day, if he pleases. That would matter very little to me. I shall not defend myself to him; but you are different, and to you I say, on my honour, I did it from no lightness or disrespect; but simply because your beauty and sweetness, and the look in your dear eyes—the look that is in them now—made me forget everything else but yourself, and my love for you. Sybil, do you know that I believe I have loved you ever since that first moment when I came upon you in the turnip field yonder, and frightened all the colour out of your sweet face? I longed to kiss you then, you looked so pale; but last night I fancied—

Dear, look at me, and blame me if you will for my presumption—but the fancy did not come to me that your engagement had not been after all the promptings of your own heart, and that if you had been free to choose, you might, perhaps, have cared for me instead. Was I wrong? For pity's sake be true, and tell me.'

And then he let go her hands, and Sybil covered her eyes with them from his gaze, and sobbed in answer,—

'I cannot help it—I cannot! If you had only come before. But I am not free. I—belong to him. Oh, I am so unhappy!' And then her lips were sealed, for Gareth had taken her in his arms, and only the west wind and the sunlight, only the laughing water and the golden furze blossoms reflected in it, heard all that he poured out in passionate payment for her confession.

CHAPTER VIII.

'AND FAITH UNFAITHFUL MADE HIM FALSELY TRUE.'

FOR nearly a minute Sybil let him have his way. There was no one within sight on the wide broken heath; no one near, only the bees humming round the furze-blossoms, and the lark's song thrilling in the blue above; and Sybil stood quite still, making no motion to repulse him, even when he covered her hair and hands, and the very ruffles at her little wrists, with worshipping kisses.

She was very unhappy, as she had said: she was sure of it; but, with Gareth's arm round her, and her face hidden against his shoulder, it was an unhappiness nearer heaven than earth, and earth seemed to fade away beneath it. She knew well that what she was doing would break Lionel's loyal heart, shock her mother and Jenny beyond all words, and make all the little world that knew her, that world to which she had been a pattern, and of whose *convenances* she had always been so scrupulous, cry shame upon her name. But what were all these things, hitherto the most important in her life to her? What was the world, or Lionel, what were even her mother and Jenny, compared with this man, Gareth Vane, and the supreme fact that he loved her? It might be that they would never let her see or speak to him again, that this was the last time they

would ever stand hand-in-hand together ; and, if so, would it not be useless sorrow in after years to look back to the thought that she had been cold or cruel to him in this the one hour of their hearts' union ? She had never been used to arguing, or looking forward to the future ; but love, the first real impassioned love of her life, had altered her whole nature in one moment, had turned her from a smiling, simple, tranquil-spirited girl into a woman, with all a woman's trembling foresight and keenly tender sensitiveness for the one nearest to her ; and when Gareth asked her again, ' Are you sure you love me, darling ? Say it to me once more, that you love me, and me only, that you never loved that other man at all,' her sweet low voice answered him as simply and earnestly as a child would have done.

' I love you ; not as I ever loved anyone before. I did not know what love was till I knew you.'

' And yet they would have made you marry that young person. But you know it now, and you will not—swear it to me, child : you won't have anything to do with him. I can't bear to think that he holds you by even a nominal engagement.'

' No, I will not marry him. I could not now. No, not even if they never let me see you again. But oh, how angry he will be ! How angry they will all be ! And she drew herself apart from him, and looked about her with a pale, shivering glance. The angel with the fiery sword stood very near the gate of her Eden, after all. The shadow of his wrathful brow was even now upon her.

' What will they say to me when they know ? ' she murmured pitifully. ' Mr Vane, is it very wrong of me ? I feel so treacherous and wicked ; and yet—and yet it is not my fault.'

' Of course it is not your fault,' said Gareth, smiling cheerily into her troubled face as he took one of her hands and kissed it. He was in one of his most joyous moods—bright, tender, wilful—his face more beautiful than ever in the triumph of his victory.

' It is the fault of those who forced you into an engagement with a man you never cared for. You are sure you never cared for him, Sybil ? '

' I liked him, I was fond of him ; but—oh no ! not like *this*.' She interrupted herself shuddering. ' He was very good to me, however, always. Ah dear ! what will he think of me now ? '

' Sweet, if we are to trouble about what everyone thinks of

us, we should never do anything or please anybody or have any pleasure in life at all. Tell Mr Ashleigh that you've changed your mind, and refer him to me if he worries you.'

'But, mamma—Jenny,' and poor Sybil's head drooped lower and lower. Her native timidity was overcoming her; and Gareth got half-impatient. Now that the prize was his own he could not brook any hesitation in its allegiance.

'Jenny! Good heavens! what has she to do with it? Are you sure after all that you do love me? No, don't look at me me in that way. Give me your hands, both of them, and promise that nothing any of these people can say will shake you in your faith to me. What are their fancies and prejudices compared with the love and happiness of our whole life? Don't mind them, Sybil, and they'll come round all the sooner;' and he laughed gaily, stroking the hand he still held as he walked by her side, and building castles in the air of their future life together so bright and glowing, that by-and-by the roses came back into Sybil's cheeks; and when he parted from her there was even a smile upon the lips he kissed.

It was all very well, however, for Gareth to keep up her spirits while he was with her, but when he was gone and she was left alone, the natural softness and weakness of her character, that weakness which had already made it easy to her to engage herself to Lion and then to break with him and bind herself anew to Gareth, reasserted itself. And though the latter did not leave her till she was positively within sight of the gabled roof and clustered chimneys of her own home, the short space which she had to traverse by herself might have been miles, judging by the amount of fear, irresolution, and remorse which was crowded into it. And it says much for the strength of her love for Gareth, that during the whole day, even when a sharp tone in her mother's voice, or an unconscious word from Jenny in reference to her approaching marriage, made her shake and flush and feel that death would almost be preferable to telling them of her change of mind, no thought of concealing it altogether, or of being faithless to Gareth in his turn, ever crossed her soul. She loved him, and she would be true to him, even if she never saw him again. And so far from there being any division of her thoughts between the two men, to both of whom she stood at present in the same position; Lionel might never have existed, from her entire ignoring of any grief or loss to him in the affair, her absolute want of tenderness, or even womanly feeling, for the cruel blow to both his trust and

love when he should hear of her infidelity. Like that erring knight of Arthurian romance—

‘Her honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept her falsely true.’

Of only two things she was quite sure: nothing should induce her to trust herself in his presence again, and no threats or persuasions should avail to make her unsay her love for Gareth.

Her mother and sister were more than usually tender and caressing to her that day, fearing that her pale cheeks and alternate languor and restlessness foretokened actual illness; but they avoided teasing her by comments or inquiries, and Sybil accepted their kindness in uneasy silence, conscious at every moment of how differently they would look and speak when they knew all, and feeling a half-incredulous wonder that she could be sitting there between them, she who had never had an existence apart or a secret of her own in her life, and they be ignorant of all that had taken place in the latter during the past twenty-four hours.

As usual, it was on Jenny that she placed her reliance. Jenny might disapprove—would disapprove—she knew that well enough; but she would never desert her; and she would stand between her and that pale-faced, fragile little mother, whose cold eyes and sharp lips had managed to inspire the child she so idolised with as much secret awe as love.

It was that same night, and Jenny, happily unconscious of all that had been going on in her sister's mind, was already in bed and halfway through her first slumber, when the door of communication between her room and Sybil's opened slowly and hesitatingly, and a white-robed figure stood for a moment or two faltering on the threshold, and then precipitated itself with a kind of rush towards the bed whence Jenny, disturbed by the opening of the door, was just lifting her head.

‘Jenny,’ whispered the intruder's voice—a voice choked with tears—as two arms were thrown round the younger girl in the semi-darkness, and a wet cheek touched hers timidly, ‘Jenny, do wake up! I am so unhappy; I must come to you. Oh, Jenny! I *can't* marry Lion Ashleigh. I don't love him: I never did love him, and I won't marry him. Oh! do be kind and help me, for I am so miserable about it; and unless you will tell him and mamma for me I don't know what to do.’

Jenny felt cold all over. If she had been awakened by the sudden dashing of a pail of ice-cold water in her face, she could

not have felt more utterly frozen than she was by the horror and dismay which struck through her at Sybil's words. That the latter had been foolish in allowing Gareth Vane to make his attentions to her unnoticed, and that Lion was not unreasonably vexed thereat, she had dimly surmised already ; but this—this was something of which she had never even dreamed ; and for a moment she almost fancied that it was indeed some horrible nightmare from which she should awake to thank God for its unreality. Alas ! the tender, creeping moonbeams, stealing in through the branches of rose and honeysuckle which framed the window, showed her the open door of Sybil's room with the yellow lamplight within, the dress she had taken off hanging across a chair, the ivory brushes and combs scattered about on the dressing-table, showed more clearly still the fair dishevelled head, half-hidden in the bedclothes at her side, and the small cold hand clasping her shoulder in pitiful entreaty. Was her sister delirious then ?

‘Sybil—hush !’ she said, sitting up and putting one arm round the other girl, as the latter half-knelt, half-crouched by the bedside. ‘What do you mean ? Have you been dreaming ? Dear, you can’t know what you say.’

‘Yes, but I do,’ Sybil moaned. The warm contact of Jenny’s protecting arm was comforting to her ; but she still kept her face hidden. ‘I have been wanting to tell you all day ; but I knew you would be so shocked, and I could not, before mamma ; only, Jenny, it must be known sooner or later, and I can’t help it. It has been a mistake all along ; but it was Lion’s own fault for making me engage myself to him.’

‘Lion’s fault !’ cried Jenny. The enormity of the thing fairly took away her breath. She almost shook her sister. ‘Sybil, I cannot understand you. “A mistake !” What was a mistake ? Not your engagement ? Oh, my dear ! what can you be thinking of ? Who has put this into your head ? It can’t have come to you of itself.’

‘Why not ?’ said Sybil. She was still crying, but there was a touch of petulance in her grief. She had known that Jenny would be terribly shocked and angry with her. She was prepared for that, but this utter incredulity was annoying—it made her conduct look so much worse, and necessitated such a lot of repetition.

‘Plenty of other people have made mistakes before, and I am no worse than they. I could not help it, and I am very sorry ; but it would be still worse to marry a man whom one did not love. You would not do that yourself.’

'I/ ' exclaimed Jenny : but then a little gleam of hope came to her, and she added more collectedly, 'Sybil, I know what this means. You are not in earnest. There has been some little quarrel between you and Lion. It was last night, was it not? He was vexed with you for staying out in the garden. Perhaps he thought it was not wise, and spoke a little hastily. Dear Sybil, tell me if it wasn't so. I wouldn't ask you if you hadn't said all this. I know you wouldn't like to tell even me if you were vexed with him ; but do think how much worse what you are saying is. A *mistake!* your love for Lion, our own good, true Lion, who loves you so dearly, and who has grown to be just like a son to mamma, and a very own brother to me, just through his caring or you—you cannot mean that ! '

'Yes ; that is just it,' said Sybil, still in the same petulant tone. ' You were always exalting him, and mamma had set her mind on having him for a son, and what could I do? It was you who made it up between you. It is all your doings, and I have given away ; but—but'—bursting into tears again—"I cannot go on with it any longer. No, not even if you both turn against me. And he will not want me to do so when he knows the truth ; it would be wicked of him if he did.'

'The truth ! ' Jenny repeated, much shocked. ' But what is the truth? When have you learnt that you did not love Lionel? You loved him nearly a year ago when he asked you to marry him. You loved him yesterday. What has put this fancy into your head ? '

Sybil hesitated a moment.

'It is no fancy,' she said falteringly. ' I was fond of him in a way. I thought I loved him ; but I was wrong. I did not know—I did not know what love was.'

'And do you know now?' asked Jenny wonderingly. Her face went all over a sudden burning red. This pure, upright virginal young creature felt as if she had received a sudden blow, as if a soil had fallen on her mind. She loosened her sister's arms, and tried to look into her face. 'Who has taught you, then? Sybil, for pity's sake be angry with me, scold me, if I am wrong, but only say it is not that Mr Vane.'

For a whole minute, as it seemed to the younger girl, Sybil was silent. Then a quick warm light came into her eyes, a soft flame to her cheeks, kindling and irradiating the whole face with an inexpressible glow and sweetness, till even her shrinking, slender figure seemed to gather strength and glory.

'Yes,' she said, very clearly and softly, 'it is Gareth Vane.

You must not say anything against him, please, for he loves me too. He has told me so. That is why I never want to see Lionel again.'

For the first time in her life Jenny recoiled from her sister. For the first time in her life she felt the clasp of those pretty hands, heard her speak in those low tender tones, and felt no sympathy for her. For the first time in her life she recognised the exquisite flower-likeness of her beauty and winsomeness with no thrill of pleasure or admiration. She did not speak at all for a minute, and then she drew herself away from Sybil's grasp, covering her face with both her hands, and said, with a depth of shame and sorrow in her voice which would have touched a stone,—

'See him again! Oh poor Lionel! poor Lionel! If you had been dead to-night, and he had to see you so, it would have been bad enough; but this—' and there she broke off with a great choking sob, and Sybil made no answer, only cried a little, very softly, and shivered, and felt without those protecting arms as if she were suddenly left to herself, and was very cold and unhappy and badly used. It seemed too cruel to be true that Jenny, Jenny her ever loyal servant and shadow, should turn away from her so. Even her worst fears had not foreboded such a judgment as this; and her head sank, her whole slender supple figure shrank and drooped beneath it; and only the strange new-born passion and reality of her love for Gareth prevented her from pulling her sister's hands down, and begging her not to say such things, for she had only been joking, and Lionel need never even know of the jest. It was a severe trial for a nature physically and essentially soft and cowardly; but she did love Gareth, and that love, true in itself though false to another, pure in constitution though a sin in its direction, upheld her. He was unworthy of it. It was the curse of her young life, a curse already begun, and marring all the sweetness and placidity of its course; but even in crushing, it elevated her, and from that hour to the one when she lay white and cold within her coffin, she never by word or thought repudiated it.

Even at present, however, her silence and tears were pleading for her. Jenny had no sooner spoken than the terribleness of her own words smote on her. *Dead!* Was it true that Lion or she could better bear to see Sybil, their own cherished darling, shut away from them for ever, and buried beneath the cold grave-clogs, than fallen from herself by even such infidelity as this? And even if it were true, could it be right or wise to put

a judgment so harsh into words when it might not be too late, by pleading and persuasion, to hinder the falling at all? Impetuous in all her movements, she turned suddenly and threw her arms again round Sybil, drawing her up against her own warm bosom with a clasp as tight and passionate as though she would have held her there from all the world.

'Sybil dear, dear Sybil, forgive me for saying that,' she pleaded. 'You were not in earnest. You don't know your own feelings. Oh! do think a little before you grieve everyone—Lionel and our mother, above all—by such a fancy as this. Who is this Mr Vane? How many times have you ever seen him? What do we know of him at all—except as a handsome man with a habit of saying flattering and cynical things in the same breath, and a name even here for being fast and reckless? No; don't push me away. I am not saying anything against him. It is enough for me that he has been capable of making love to you, a woman already engaged—all but married. There is no need to say any more! and (dear Sybil, think of it yourself) that is what you are. For more than ten months you have been Lion's promised wife. This is June already, and in August you are going to be married; and only the other day mother and I were thinking it was time to fix a day for our trip to London about your clothes. Why, Lion has been busy for weeks back over the alterations he is having made in the vicarage to improve it for you. His whole life is wrapt up in you. If you were his wife already, he could not love you more fondly or confide in you more fully. He told me once himself that he had never even had a flirtation with another woman. And you—you who would not tell an untruth or hurt a fly for your life—how could you bear to look him in the face and tell him that you are going to do this base and unwomanly thing: that you care for another man, a man you have hardly seen a dozen times; and that all his love and faithfulness, even the solemn promise you have given, are nothing to you? Oh, my dear, you couldn't do it! You couldn't fall so low from all truth and honesty. I know you better than you know yourself, and I'll tell you what it is. You have been foolish and a little weak, for you have liked this man and let him say flattering things to you; and now because he has fallen in love with you, you are frightened and think that it is your fault, and that because you've let him lead you a little bit wrong you must go further still and break your troth and poor Lion's heart. But that is all a mistake. Can't you see it yourself, now that you are away from Mr Vane, and not blinded

by his sophistries? Oh! do be brave and reasonable; do, my own darling sister! Put that man away from you, and make up your mind not to meet him again, or let him bewitch you further. Think of it, Sybil! Think of the love in Lionel's eyes when he looks at you. Think how near you are to being his wife, and how sacred a thing is your engagement to him; and promise me, promise now, for his sake and your own, and all of us, that you won't even remember, if you can help it, what you said just now.'

But Sybil would not promise; neither would she argue. Argument was not her *forte*, indeed; and all the little vehemence of which she was capable had been expended in her first outburst. Jenny's words, pleading, tender, choked with tears, full of fire and passion, touched her gently and made her own flow in answer, but never even grazed her will. It is not your fervent enthusiastic natures which gain the day, but those soft, quiet, silken-slipped ones, which seem as if any hand could fashion them to whatever form it pleased. Sybil was not angry with her sister for lecturing her. She still clung to her, taking a small physical consolation from her warmth and the support of her arms, even in the midst of her sorrow; but all she said was,—

'I cannot help it. If it is wrong to break with Lionel, it would be worse to marry him, knowing that I love someone else; and I shall never love anyone but Gareth now. You do not know what love is. I did not, till I knew him. That is how I know I never really cared for Lion: never at all. But, O Jenny! be kind to me still, and tell mamma for me. She must know; and I cannot bear the hard things I know she will say of him. I might say something bad to her in return. Dear Jenny, do be good and help me.'

And in the end Jenny was persuaded to agree, so far as telling their mother was concerned; though it was a long time before she gave in even that much—not until the silver moon, travelling slowly through the watches of the night, had passed away altogether from the latticed window which the honeysuckles were tapping in the breeze, and had left the sisters in darkness save for that yellow gleam of lamplight from the inner room.

'God help and comfort Lionel when he hears of it!' she said at last. 'If you can bear to think how lonely and desolate his life must be from this night forth, I cannot. Oh, my dear! I have no other sister but you. I *can't* forsake you, what-

ever you do ; but I never thought it was in you to forsake him.'

Yet before Sybil left her she had promised to soften the news as much as she could to their mother, and even to plead for her indulgence to the wilful pair who were breaking through all she held most sacred to come together ; and when the elder girl crept back again to her own room, it was with a less heavy heart than she had left it a couple of hours before ; and before long she slept sweetly and soundly, while Jenny lay awake weeping bitter tears of shame and sorry for the wrong-doing which she had no power to prevent.

Mrs Dysart proved, however, less tender-hearted than her younger daughter. At first the shock of Jenny's news seemed to petrify her ; and the girl was horrified to see her turn deadly white, press one hand upon her heart, and sink back upon the sofa as though she were fainting. She was conscious, however, for she held the girl's hand to prevent her from rushing for assistance or restoratives, and continued to clutch it tightly until she was able to articulate.

'It is not true. It cannot be. *Sybil*—my daughter—guilty of such shameful wickedness ! Sybil in love with another man, wanting to throw off— Nonsense ! She is not capable of it. This is some exaggerated fancy of your own. You were always fanciful, Jenny ; but you should not say things like that to frighten me so. Send Sybil here herself. No, I don't want to hear another word from you. Send her to me.' And when, in obedience to the message Jenny had no resource but to deliver, Sybil arrived, looking prettier and sweeter than usual in her trembling humility and tearfulness. Mrs Dysart had quite recovered, and fairly laughed in her face as she told her that she had heard some foolish wicked rhodomontade about her and a Mr Vane, and desired her to contradict it at once.

This, however, Sybil would not do. Perhaps the withering contempt in her mother's tone roused even her gentle spirit, for, to Jenny's surprise, she answered with actual warmth,—

'Mamma, I am very sorry, but I cannot. I knew you would be angry ; but it is not my fault. I do love Mr Vane—I cannot help it ; and I have told him so.'

'Then, my dear, sit down and write to him at once that you were out of your senses when you so far forgot all womanliness and decency, but that now you have come to them again, and never mean to see him any more or have any further intercourse with him. Good God ! that a child of mine should have

so degraded herself! I pray him that Lionel may never hear of this. I doubt, if he did, whether even his affection would induce him to forgive you and make you his wife. For his sake, however, we will hush it up; and you will go with me to London to-morrow to make arrangements about your wedding-clothes. There must be no more delay.'

Sybil flushed crimson.

'Lion knows already, mamma. I wrote to him the first thing this morning, and told him that I could not marry him, and why. He will not want to force me to do so—he is too manly; but if he did it would be no use. I am very sorry to vex you; and of course if you forbid me to marry Gareth Vane I will not disobey you; but I shall never love anybody else. I shall wait, and be true to him all the same.'

Mrs Dysart looked at her without speaking. There was an unusual glow and warmth about Sybil, and a gleam in her eyes which made her quite different from her ordinary self, and gave her a certain resoluteness and force of expression which she had never had before. Gazing at her, the mother's face grew livid even to the lips, the lines seemed to deepen on her brow, and her cheeks to become more hollow. She sat perfectly silent till Sybil had quite ceased, then said very low, as if to herself,—

'It has come!' Her eyes closed for a moment, and she shivered. Then she looked at Sybil, and added quite coldly and slowly, 'In that case, I have nothing more to say to you. I shall not change my mind. When you change yours, I shall believe you are my daughter. At present I have only one.' And rising, she took Jenny's arm, and walked out of the room and up to her own, with stiff, dragging steps. She did not come down again the rest of that day, and Sybil spent the greater part of it in tears; but the resolution of neither wavered. Mrs Dysart refused to speak to her daughter again until the latter submitted, or to allow Gareth to enter her doors. She tore in half a letter which (at Sybil's entreaty) he wrote her, and returned it to him unread; and she forbade Jenny even to mention his name or her sister's in her hearing. Yet still Sybil, though looking wretchedly pale and ill, held out, and not only adhered to her refusal to see Lionel again (though at first he was very urgent in his entreaty that she should do so), but seemed rather anxious than otherwise that the fact of her engagement with Lionel Ashleigh being broken off should be known as speedily and as widely as possible.

It was a very wretched time at Hillbrow. The dark cloud of trouble and dissension had broken at last over the quiet happy little household ; and even the servants felt the shadow of it, and went about their work with stealthy steps and saddened faces.

Book IV.

CHAPTER I.

LOVE'S OBSTINACY.

Is it needful to tell how great was the excitement which reigned, and buzzed, and fumed, and chattered ; which flew from house to house, and fluttered at church doors, and rushed frantically round in morning calls ; which whispered in corners, and pulled long faces in public, and was intensely, wildly, eagerly joyous and self-righteous from one end of Chadleigh End to the other, when the news first got about that Sybil Dysart had jilted young Ashleigh, and thrown herself into the arms of that handsome, dare-devil, penniless, detrimental Gareth Vane ?

Mrs Chawler said if you had sworn it on the Bible she would never have believed it. Mrs De Boonyen said *she* had foreseen it all along ; in fact, it was just what she had expected. Those white-and-pink girls, with a way of looking up under their lashes at people (the Miss De Boonyens had no lashes to look up under, but that is not to the point), never came to any good ; and for her part she thought Mr Ashleigh greatly to be congratulated on having escaped in time ; and felt thankful that she herself had always discouraged any intimacy at Hillbrow, and had said to her dear girls—*so* different they were !—‘ You may be kind to the Miss Dysarts when they come here, and I do not mind your calling on them now and then ; but there it must end. I cannot permit anything more.’

Indeed, it was quite wonderful how many people discovered all of a sudden that it was they who had snubbed Mrs Dysart’s advances and thought but little of her girls ; and as to the exaggerations, distortions, and inventions to which the first rumour of Sybil’s breach of faith gave rise, so numerous, far-fetched, and ingenious were they, that it would have required the eye of

an expert in scandal-sifting to detect the one poor grain of truth among the huge mass of falsehoods which had been heaped up and scattered abroad before the incident was forty-eight hours old.

One report said that Lion had found his betrothed in the act of stepping into a boat with Gareth Vane on the night of Mrs Chawler's party, and had dragged her back to the house by force.

Another declared that the two had actually eloped from the ball, and that Lion was gone after them in pursuit.

Again, Lion had found out that the Dysarts were no better than they should be, and had broken the engagement himself. This was supposed to emanate from Hapsburg Hall:

Again, Mrs Dysart had had a fit on hearing of her daughter's conduct, and was not expected to live; and Lion and Gareth were both gone to Belgium to fight a duel, the former having declared that if it cost him his gown he would shoot his rival like a dog.

Yet again: The bishop had sent an official to stop the duel, and had insisted on Lion's giving up the care of the parish in favour of Mr Beale, of Epsom, the red-haired widower, whose five small children and ragged shirts had touched the soft heart of Horatia Maude de Boonyen.

These and a dozen other equally veracious histories were among those that floated about Chadleigh End during the week or ten days which immediately followed the Chawlers' ball, and were bandied about, improved on and melted together, till where truth ended or began would have been impossible for the most impartial outsider to discover; and one result of them was amusing. Never had Dilworth Hall, the Rectory, or Hillbrow been invaded by such a constant stream of callers; and at the last house in particular the very people who were pretending to regret that they had ever shown any attentions to Miss Dysart at all, kept the hall-door knocker going pretty continuously every day from four to six.

As for Lionel, once more among the list of eligible young men, he had never been so popular, so pitied and talked about, in his life.

Fortunately, he was not aware of it. The one grain of truth in those reports about him was his absence. He was not in Chadleigh to hear them. What Sybil had said to him in her letter no one of course knew save himself; but that letter and her steady refusal to see him, had convinced him that any attempts to revive her old affection, or bring her back to her

broken faith, were useless ; and for the time the blow almost crushed him. She had been the one love of his life ; and he had trusted in her as utterly as he trusted in himself. The shock to both love and trust was terrible ; and, unable to remain in the spot where it had been inflicted, still more unable to bear the ridicule or compassion of his neighbours, he had called on Mr Beale, asked him as a favour to take the duty at Chadleigh End for him for a week or two ; and then had rushed off to try as best he might to gather strength and courage to face what remained for him in life, in some spot where the effort had more chance of success than in the very place which held his lost and fickle love.

The gossips who flocked to Chadleigh church on Sunday, and crowded its narrow aisles with eager faces all on the quiver to see how the curate bore his disappointment, were disappointed themselves. Lion was not to be seen ; and only poor little Horatia Maude derived any consolation from the almost pathetic ugliness of Mr Beale's care-lined middle-aged face rising above the pulpit in his place.

Nor did the curious ones get much good out of their visits of inquiry ; not even that of being denied admission. Mrs Ashleigh, it is true, was away from home on a visit ; but so, as was soon ascertained, she had been on the night of the eventful dance ; and though Sybil, as may be supposed, did not make herself visible, her mother and sister received people as usual, and answered inquiries for her with a 'Very well, thank you,' 'Out for a walk,' or 'Engaged at present,' uttered as calmly as if nothing had happened ; while at the Hall, Lady Ashleigh took a broad and lofty tone, and, though by no means contradicting the report that her nephew's engagement to Miss Dysart was broken off, declined to blame the latter or discuss the subject in any way, beyond observing that she was not aware of their having been any quarrel or question of another gentleman in the matter ; and that though these things were always a pity and naturally painful to the persons affected by them, she thought it infinitely better that young people should learn their own minds, however late, before entering on such a solemn contract as marriage rather than after it ; and that for her part, she had no right or intention to comment on a matter with which only the parties principally concerned had anything to do.

It was the most severe snub that good-natured Lady Ashleigh had ever inflicted ; and in one or two instances I believe it was felt ; not in all. There are some skins in this world so

wonderfully thick that to unscientific people it would at times seem more reasonable if man had been evolved from the rhinoceros, or any other of the pachyderms (proverbially the most ancient of surviving beasts), rather than from the irritable and easily-offended ape.

Nevertheless, and although Lady Ashleigh adopted this generous tone to outsiders, it is not to be supposed that she, or any of the family, looked on Sybil's conduct with a lenient or forgiving eye; and perhaps not the least among the sorrows which now hung heavily over the little household at Hillbrow, was the division which each felt must in future exist between them and their oldest and dearest friends. Mrs Dysart, indeed, had written to the rector's wife herself to tell her what had occurred: a letter which, from a woman so proud and little given to displays of feeling, must have shown anyone how bitterly her heart was wrung by her daughter's misconduct; but unfortunately it was addressed to a mother whose own heart was at that moment sore and hot with indignation over the wrong done to her only son; and the answer she received was this:—

'DEAR CLARE,—I am very sorry for you; but I see no good in our saying anything on the subject. You have always had theories about bringing up your girls. Apparently they haven't answered with this one, and you and she must take the consequences. As things have turned out, I suppose Lion has had a lucky escape, and I hope he will learn so to consider it. As to the rest, I fancy it will be pleasanter for both you and me not to meet for some little while. We can hardly have many agreeable subjects of conversation, and disagreeable ones I prefer to avoid.—Yours, as usual, R. ASHLEIGH.'

Poor proud little Mrs Dysart felt this letter as one of the cruellest drops in her cup of suffering; and yet Mrs Ashleigh did not mean to be cruel. She was only a strong woman with a sarcastic tongue, and much wrought up at present by what she considered as an insult to herself, and an act of base and unpardonable treachery to her son. Later, Adelaide Ashleigh wrote to Sybil herself an angry, impulsive letter, such as came naturally from a young and loving wife, who was both the sinner's earliest friend and the injured party's cousin; and her indignant renunciation of all friendship between her and the former cost Sybil even more bitter tears than she had already shed over Lion's far gentler epistles.

It was terrible to her, this being cast out from all love and friendship : she who had hitherto been the centre and idol of all, the one to whom all deferred and who could do no wrong ; and if it had not been for Jenny, I am almost doubtful whether even Gareth Vane's strange influence over her, and her intense and passionate love for him, could have enabled her to hold out against the sternness of the rest of the world, her mother's in particular.

For Mrs Dysart persisted in treating her as a wilful and disobedient child, and in refusing to hold any communication with her, or listen to anything she had to say, until she had first made an unconditional surrender. If Sybil would not marry Lionel, she must at least renounce Mr Vane at once and for ever ; and until she did so Mrs Dysart would not even bid her daughter good-morning or good-night. She never spoke to her, she even avoided looking at her ; and though feeling and seeming wretchedly ill and enfeebled, refused to accept even the smallest service from her hands.

It was tyranny, of course, this complete ostracism ; but though the mother's heart was in truth yearning over her child the whole time, she persisted in it as the best means of bringing the latter to her senses with the least possible delay. Sybil must be brought to them. That was a matter which did not admit of any question on Mrs Dysart's part. Supposing the Ashleighs had never existed, a man of Gareth Vane's character, a fast liver without fortune or reputation, was the last whom she would ever have permitted to hold intercourse with her daughter. It was a proof of his infamy that he could take advantage of Sybil's weakness of character to inveigle her away from her rightful lover ; but in that case it was the mother's plain duty to be strong for both, and to save her from ruin, even if it must be at the cost of a little temporary harshness.

It was only temporary. The girl must yield in time. The wonder to Mrs Dysart was that she had not done so already. It seemed almost incredible that anything so soft and docile should have proved as resistant already on this subject as she had done, and daily and hourly the widow watched for the submission which, in all the misery of her present life, Sybil had no thought of giving.

Gareth loved her. He was her god. How could she forsake him ? Besides, she had Jenny still !

For just as little could Jenny forsake her. Strongly as the younger girl condemned her sister's conduct, keen as were the

pain and humiliation which flooded her soul whenever she thought of Lionel and the wrong done to him, she could not join in the prevailing harshness towards the wrongdoer. Her love for Sybil was greater even than her horror of Sybil's sin ; and gradually, even through that horror, she began to recognise, what was in fact the truth, that her sister's love for Gareth, though a sin indeed as regarded its bestowal when she was already engaged to another, was in its own character perhaps the purest and most unselfish emotion of which Sybil had ever been capable. Her nature was not a very deep or a very strong one ; and hitherto, strange as it seems to say it, she had never loved anyone very much, save herself. Her mother idolised and watched over her, her sister worshipped and waited on her ; and Sybil accepted the idolatry, the watching and waiting, as a matter of course, and repaid them with sweet smiles and sunny looks, because these things were pleasant to her, and smiling was the easiest form of payment she knew of. Easiness was indeed the chief rule of her life. It was easier to her to be soft, gracious, and yielding than hard or obstinate, and her family and friends lauded her highly for the exhibition of these qualities ; but none the less she had always managed to get her way in anything she wanted when she had set her mind on it ; not going openly against the person in opposition, but going round them in a quiet, circuitous fashion which she had inherited from her mother. But with this strange newborn love of hers, all this seemed altered, and all the placid, sweet-tempered selfishness of her character underwent a change. It was a love by which she had nothing to gain and everything to lose. It meant declension from the social sphere in which it had hitherto pleased her to hold so serene a sway ; poverty and Bohemianism, the mere thought of which was enough to cause her soft, well-regulated senses a shiver of repulsion ; loss of friends, and love and kindness from almost all of those in whom her happiness had been hitherto bound up.

It was a love which could be nothing but misfortune and misery ; and yet for the mere hope of its return she was willing to sacrifice home, comfort, love and friendship, and go out into the world with a man of whom she knew hardly anything, save that he was in his own words one of the 'black sheep of society,' willing to work for him, bear with him, starve for him if need be ; and count herself honoured and blest in having her sacrifice accepted.

'But it would make no difference even if he did not love me,'

she said to Jenny one of these days as she sat by her window with the warm June wind blowing about her fair hair, and the nodding clusters of monthly roses making flickering shadows on her cheek. 'I should go on loving him all the same; and I should never care for anyone else. How could I, having known him! Bad? Oh, hush! If only good people were to be loved, what a hopeless place this world of sinners would be!—and he is not as bad as you think. See how he loves me, I who am not good myself! No, you needn't contradict me; I am not. I never was. You are good, and so are Lionel and mamma (only she is too hard in wanting her own way), and you have all taken care of me as if I were a child, and told me what to do and how to think, and called me good because I seemed to do and think it. But that is not goodness, really, it is giving in; and I am not a child. It has all been a sham, and Gareth has only made me feel more how tired I am of it. To him at any rate I am a woman; and I can be of use to him. I can do things for him. *He* looks up to me— Dear Jenny, don't look so shocked and miserable. It will come to you too, one of these days; only I hope everyone will not be against you then as they are against me. Perhaps, as you are so different, you will be more fortunate.'

— 'I don't want to be fortunate,' said Jenny, her eyes full of big tears; 'but I would like—O Sybil! forgive me—I would like to try to be true.'

'And that is what I am trying to be now,' said Sybil, in the same soft unresentful voice. 'Somehow I could not love Gareth as I do, and know that he loves me, and be anything else. I mean to be true—to him.'

'And Lionel!' Jenny cried out, almost indignantly, but her sister checked her.

'Hush! That was quite different. I never cared for him, you know I did not. It was mamma. She always seemed to have settled it, and there was no one else in particular; and—and I did not want people to say it was Miss De Boonyen he wanted. Oh yes; I daresay it was wrong, and that Mrs Ashleigh and Adelaide have a right to be offended with me; I don't blame them. It makes me miserable enough to think of it myself, and to know that Gareth may do so too, and fancy that because I have changed once I might change again; but I suppose that is part of my punishment, that and mamma's anger; and I must just bear it. He will know some day, and mamma too, that I could not change now.'

'But suppose mamma does not change either?' cried Jenny. The younger girl was in a kind of maze of sorrow and wonder and indignation. How could Sybil talk in that calm, dull voice, as if the thing were natural and irretrievable? Was it so, indeed? And even if so, might she not have some pity, some compunction for Lionel—Lionel who had so loved her. Was her sorrow for the treachery shown to him to be only because of the effect it might have on the new lover's mind? Oh! how could she care so much where no caring was due, and be so heartless where the best and truest of hearts was concerned! 'Mamma will never consent to your marrying Mr Vane. What will you do, Sybil?'

'I don't know,' said Sybil. She was perfectly white; but her tone had the same soft patience. 'Please don't ask me. What can I do but wait? Perhaps, when she knows him better, and sees how we care for one another— But it is quite just I should wait a little first. I have made everyone uncomfortable, so it is only right I should be punished. If she had consented at once, it would have been too much happiness; but I am very glad you are kind to me, Jenny dear. I don't know how I could have borne it all alone.'

And when she said that, what could Jenny be but kind, and what could she do but go away to make another attempt at softening the fiercer obstinacy of her mother, or to fulfil some of the home duties from which Sybil's present sentence of excommunication excluded her? In this time of trouble, indeed, Jenny seemed to have grown from the younger into the elder. With Sybil and her mother both depending on her, and both estranged from one another, with household affairs to see to, Lion's poor people to visit in her sister's place, callers to receive, baffle and dismiss—the cares of the whole house seemed to have fallen on her hands; and her young face wore at times an expression of anxious gravity and resolution which even when compared with the sadness of Sybil's, made the latter appear far the younger of the two. Yet there was no gloom on Jenny's brow, and she had always a smile for both mother and sister when they needed it. In truth, she had no time to think of herself, or will to nourish the sadness which thought could not fail to bring. When the mere memory of Lion's exiled presence sent a rush of tears to her eyes, how could she be selfish enough to wound Sybil by encouraging it? Time enough for that when her poor little erring sorrowful sister was pardoned, and at peace again: and as things were, she wished with all her heart that her mother would give in and let

this be. Even a union with Mr Vane, if he loved Sybil as she loved him, would be better than the present state of things, and for her sister's sake she would have tried to be civil and friendly to him.

It was well for Sybil that she had one near her whose love was of so unselfish a character, for her present punishment was by no means a light one, and Gareth, who had brought it on her, did not try to make it easier for her carrying.

In truth, Mr Vane considered himself a very much ill-used man. He had had no particular desire for marriage at all; certainly none for marriage with an almost penniless girl; and when betrayed into a declaration by Sybil's innocent love and beauty, and by the pleasure of triumphing over Lionel Ashleigh, he really thought that he was behaving exceedingly well in sticking to it, and in not only allowing himself to be drawn into an engagement, but voluntarily ratifying it by a formal proposal to Mrs Dysart for her daughter's hand.

But to find that proposal scornfully refused, and to have the door shut in his face when he came to woo; to find that Sybil clung to him, and expected him to cling to her and be faithful and true, while at the same time she so far refused to set her mother at defiance that she would not even see him, and merely maintained communication with him by means of piteous little letters full of love and fidelity, and entreaties that he would be patient and good, was not at all what he had looked for, and he resented it accordingly.

Patient, indeed! Why, he had never been patient in his life; and if Sybil loved him as she said, she would be as little inclined to exercise the virtue as himself.

'Confound her vicious old mother!' he said to himself, as he sat down to answer one of the above-mentioned little epistles. 'What did she matter to them? Wasn't Sybil of age, and if so, why couldn't she please herself and him? He didn't believe she did care for him, or else she would be willing to risk some small sacrifice for their joint happiness. He had risked enough for her. Why, even now he didn't know how his sister would take the news of his engagement; and for that matter he didn't much care, though as Helen was both rich and generous, she might help to smooth their path very materially if she would. At any rate, she could ask you to stay with her,' he wrote. 'As things are, you might as well be in prison as here; and if I am not even to see you, I own that I see no good in my staying at Chadleigh End at all.'

Sybil agreed with him there entirely. It was enough, and more than enough, for her love even to know that he was near her ; but if to be so made him unhappy, better, far better, that he should be far away. She saw neither selfishness nor arrogance in these daily letters of his, which were at once her food and torture, nothing but ill-requited love and undeserved suffering ; and though the very idea of his going away filled her with even a greater sense of loneliness and desolation than she was experiencing at present, she no sooner saw that he wished it than she urged it on him herself, with a ready sweetness which made him ashamed of himself.

Of course he must not stay in Chadleigh End. It was much better for him to go to his sister. Perhaps, if she knew, she might do something for them. Sybil herself knew nothing of this sister, except that she was a great deal older than Gareth, and the wife of a physician, and in her heart she felt slightly afraid of her ; but a personage of this sort was certainly not to be regarded as in a third-rate or Bohemian class of society ; and, perhaps, if mamma were acquainted with her, she would not feel so inclined to speak of Gareth as an unknown adventurer. Besides, the latter always spoke of her with gratitude and affection, as his staunchest friend through life, and it was therefore only right that she should know of the engagement he had entered into.

Gareth thought it would be wise at any rate. Helen could not blame him, seeing that she was always dinning marriage into his ears, that he might be settled in life ; and though her advice had been something like Tennyson's Northern farmer, 'Don't marry for money, but go where money is,' she had also said a great deal about virtue and position in his future wife ; and a man can't have everything. He had certainly not married for money ; but Sybil was virtuous enough, and her position everything that could be desired. Altogether his tone, as he told Mrs Hamilton the news, lounging beside her in an easy-chair two days after receiving Sybil's last unselfish letter, was one of conscious virtue, unrewarded as yet, but modestly confident of recognition. Banished as he had been from his lady-love, and repulsed by Mrs Dysart, he was really somewhat in need of a little sympathy and encouragement to relieve the despondency of his mind. Some men don't require that sort of thing, but Gareth was not one of them. Feminine petting was at all times an essential to him ; and it was therefore rather disheartening to find his news received in absolute stony silence

which might mean anything, from surprise to utter condemnation, until just as he was in the middle of a lively description of his sweetheart's charms, Mrs Hamilton lifted her hands with a sudden impatient movement, and interrupted him.

'One moment,' she said, in a tone so strange that it almost startled even him into seriousness. 'Do you mean this, that you are actually *engaged* to this young woman—going to marry her?'

'Actually and positively, my dear Helen, caged at last, and bound hand and foot like any victim for the sacrifice. Please pity me, and say something soothing, for I have need of consolation.'

She did nothing of the sort. Her voice had the same tone as before, only it was harsher as she said,—

'Are you aware that you have not told me her name yet? What is it?'

'A very pretty one. Dysart—Amy Sybil Dysart; but they call her by her second name—Sybil—I suppose because she's such a fascinating little witch. Why, Helen, what the deuce is the matter with you?'

For the moment she did not answer him. Her lips had turned to a livid paleness, and her hands were trembling violently. Her very senses, indeed, seemed whirling beneath the utterance of that name, which for years back had been branded into her memory as with letters of living fire, 'Amy—Amy Dysart.'

With a movement at once stiff and hurried she rose up and turned towards the door.

'Wait here,' she said huskily; 'I am going to look for something. I will speak to you when I come back. Wait here.'

CHAPTER II.

MRS DYSART'S CONFESSION.

It was almost the hottest day of the exceptionally hot July that year. The little Mole, dwindled down into a miserable streamlet, seemed to simmer in its too spacious bed, and hot unhealthy exhalations hung like a mist over the water-meadows adjoining it. Dorking, sweltering in its steaming valley; Epsom, baking on its dusty plain, were alike unbearable. Even the greenness of Chadleigh End was choked under clouds of dust, and the

heath where Gareth had met Sybil lay scorching in the noon-day sun, bare and baked, with little eddies of peaty dust blown up now and again by the hot air, to settle down afresh on the brown and blossomless clumps of gorse, so lately all a glory of green and gold, and the thorny purple-flowered tangle of black-berry bushes.

There was a man crossing the heath now. Not Gareth ; it was a week or more since he had left the village, and this man, though strong and well built, had neither the handsome Londoner's height nor his elegance of dress. In fact, he was decidedly careless, if not shabby, in his attire ; and it required a second glance at the dusty low-crowned felt hat and the clerical collar, which his down-bent head almost concealed, to even detect the fact that he belonged by profession to the respectable service of the Church militant.

But Lionel Ashleigh had never been a dandy in his palmiest times, and now, in the early days of his return home and re-assumption of those duties which the first shock of Sybil's desertion had tempted him to fling aside, he thought less of his dress or appearance than ever.

It was not for long that he had abandoned his parish and people. To lay down the work and obligations to which he had pledged himself, and for the discharge of which he was paid, would have seemed to him alike cowardly and dishonest ; and when Mr Beale sent him a kindly hint that Gareth was no longer at Chadleigh End, he made up his mind to return at once to the village, as to the care of which his conscience was already pricking him. The message reached him in one of the most northern hamlets in Norway, and within four days of its receipt he was back in Surrey. But though in coming back to his post he had determined to shirk none of the duties pertaining to it, nor allow a sentimental sorrow to hamper his powers of usefulness, he had not so far conquered himself as to be able to face the society which he well knew was buzzing with the news of his rejection. Notes of friendship and sympathy, notes of invitation, covered his table when he first sat down to it ; but the first were merely glanced through and thrown into the fire with a shiver of pain, while the latter were answered by the briefest of refusals. He would not even go to Dilworth, and as yet his parents had seen nothing of him ; but fortunately they were kind and sensible people, and rarely constituted enough to feel with and understand this avoidance in place of resenting it.

'Let the boy alone a bit,' said the rector to his wife. 'He's been hard hit and is very sore; but as soon as he's got over it a little he'll come back to us; ' and Lion was already sufficiently recovered to be grateful for the consideration shown him.

Indeed, he was thinking of it now as he trudged along under the fierce blue sky and scorching sun-rays to visit a sick navvy who lived on the other side of the heath, and was blaming himself for his pusillanimity in still shrinking from the sight of those who, when last he saw them, were busy with all the kindly little preparations for his approaching marriage; but the blow which turned those preparations into a mockery had been a heavy one, and his efforts to rise above it had certainly not been wholly triumphant; for happening to lift his eyes at that moment, and see a young lady coming straight to meet him, he started, coloured up to his brow, and had half turned as if to escape before he had time to recollect himself.

It was cowardice; but the cowardice perhaps had its excuse; for in the tall slim figure, the elastic walk, and delicate refinement of face and head of the approaching woman he recognised features only too familiar to him; and next to Sybil Dysart herself there was no one whom at that moment he cared less to encounter than the younger sister, with whom her image and presence were so intimately bound up.

To poor Jenny, however, the meeting was one of equal, if not greater, misery. Shame for her sister's offence so over-filled her soul with a sense of keen personal humiliation, that so far from wishing to obtrude herself on Lionel's notice she would have been only too grateful to be able to pass him by without being seen. And as his eyes met hers, and he saw the deep embarrassed flush dyeing her usually pale cheeks, the wistful quickly-averted glance, and unmistakable air of trouble and timidity pervading her whole bearing, the generous nature of the man triumphed over any latent anger or pettiness; and he not only stopped but put out his hand to greet her with more than usual kindness for the momentary hesitation.

Jenny, however, could not answer as readily. In truth, she had not thought that he would speak to her at all. Why should he, when he had received such vile treatment at her sister's hands? And yet, when she did venture to look up, the change which the last few weeks had worked in the familiar brotherly face, and the deep lines which had grown about the brow and mouth, wrought such hot pity and indignation in her as even overswept shame, and not only brimmed her eyes with tears,

but brought her other hand to join its fellow in his friendly clasp. It was a little thing, after all, to give him two hands instead of one when so much had been taken from him ; and what would they avail him ? They were only *hers*—not Sybil's.

‘ You are not looking well, Jenny,’ said Lion good-naturedly ; though, with a man’s natural repugnance to pity, the unconscious sympathy in her eyes and action added a fresh pang to the pain he was suffering. ‘ Have you been overwalking yourself this hot day ? and how—how is your mother ? ’ He could not ask after Sybil ; besides, of course she was well ; but it would be uncivil to make no inquiry for Mrs Dysart. Jenny’s lips quivered, however, as she answered,—

‘ She is not at all well, thank you. I think her heart has been more troublesome than usual ; or the heat affects her, and makes her weak and nervous. I never saw her look so ill before.’

‘ I am sorry,’ said Lion, with perfect sincerity ; for even if Mrs Dysart had acted mistakenly, and helped to bring this on him by her over-management, she had always been his friend, and since his betrothal to her daughter had petted and made much of him as though he were her own son. The remembrance of his sultan days came back to him now ; and with them certain words she had written to him when they came to an end : ‘ If Sybil has wrung your heart, believe this, that she has broken mine. The thought of her as your wife and in your care gave my life fresh strength. She has robbed me of that thought, and with it I feel as if all strength for living were gone too.’

Overstrained words they seemed at the time ; but Jenny’s answer to his question brought them back now, and caused Lion to suddenly change his resolution of making no allusion to the past, and add,—

‘ I hope she has not been taking to heart this—this change in our relations. I should be sorry if that were so ; for, after all, her daughter’s happiness ought to be the first thing with her. It’s hard to talk about this sort of thing to you, Jenny ; but I never answered a letter of your mother’s, so I may as well say this now. Of course it has seemed rough on me ; but that’s just selfishness ; and a man can’t help being selfish sometimes. Still, so long as one knows *she* is happy— Why, Jenny, Jenny child, what’s the matter with you ? ’ for, much to his surprise, Jenny had snatched away her hands and burst out crying.

‘ Happy ! ’ cried the girl almost angrily. ‘ Do you believe

that any of us is happy? that we have had a single happy moment since— And it is worse for Sybil than any of us, because it is she who has done wrong and brought this misery on her.'

'Misery?' repeated Lion. I am afraid that for one instant Jenny's outburst raised a mad fleeting hope in his heart that Sybil's misery was for him: and that, after all, she cared more for him than she had thought. 'Jenny, what do you mean? She is not miserable?' he asked tremulously; but Jenny's answer quenched the foolish fancy on the instant.

'Indeed, she is. How can she be anything else, moping up in her own room there day after day, and cut off from everyone but me: even mamma never seeing or speaking to her? Oh, Lion, forgive me! I know she has deserved it all. Even you couldn't have blamed her more than I did, and it seems horrible of me to speak to you in this way; but it is so hard to see her sitting there getting paler and sadder every day: and I don't think she could help it. I think he won her love before she knew it; and if, as she says, she was mistaken, if she never had really loved before— Dear Lion, I beg your pardon!'

'Please don't,' said Lionel quickly. Her last words had hurt him horribly; but her very distress at the slip made him anxious not to let her see he felt it. 'Tell me instead what you really mean. Surely Mrs Dysart it not at variance with— with your sister on my account! Don't be afraid to tell me, Jenny,' as he saw the girl flush and hesitate with natural disinclination to pursue so painful a subject further. 'It is right I should know, and we two were always friends, and told one another everything, you know. Don't let it be different now.'

He had taken her hand again in a kindly grasp as he spoke; and beneath the double encouragement of touch and voice Jenny's effort at reticence gave way. Was not the very sight of his honest face making her realise how utterly she had missed it during the loneliness of the last few weeks?

'But that is the worst of it, Lion,' she said, after telling him of the present state of things, and how Mrs Dysart was trying to break Sybil's spirit by a punishment which seemed likely to end only in breaking her heart. 'Nobody but you or Mrs Ashleigh could ever influence mamma in anything; and now that she has lost you both there is no one to move her. She will not even let me speak to her on the subject. That is the saddest part—there is no help for it.'

'But there shall be help!' cried Lion indignantly. The

idea of Sybil put under a ban, shut up and separated from her lover for his sake, learning perhaps to hate him for it, fired him with hot earnestness. 'Don't talk of having lost me. If that is all, I will speak to your mother myself. Do you think I will allow such a burning shame to go on now I know it? Nonsense, nonsense, Jenny child! you'd do the same in my place; you know you would.' For Jenny had suddenly stooped her head and touched with her fresh young lips the strong hand she held.

'Oh, Lionel!' she said solemnly, 'I do think you are the very best man in the world.'

And then she flushed up and moved quickly on one side; for after all a heath is a public place, and some way off, too far for them to have seen the action, but still in full sight, was a nursemaid with a little girl on a donkey.

'It is Miss Dysart and Mr Ashleigh,' the child was saying.

Lion kept his word that very afternoon. It was easy to see Mrs Dysart without encountering Sybil, as the two never met except at dinner; and to-day Sybil had hardly left her own room. She had a headache, she said; and there was a feverish irritation and annoyance in her manner when disturbed, so foreign to her usual gentleness, that Jenny had thought it best to leave her to herself. She knew Sybil had a great deal to bear, and hoped the more for the success of Lionel's intervention; but she did not feel at all sure of how her sister's pride or delicacy would brook the idea of owning anything to the latter; and was therefore rather glad to keep out of her way till she had seen what it resulted in.

At first Lion himself feared it would be a failure. Mrs Dysart indeed received him even more affectionately than he had expected; but the very generosity of his action only seemed to move her to greater indignation against Sybil; and when he pleaded with her for the poor girl's pardon, urging on her that if *he* could think of his sweetheart's happiness before his own, a mother might fairly do the same, she only bade him 'hush' in an excited manner, and turned her face away to hide the tears which were rolling down it. He was preparing to leave at last, when of a sudden her mood seemed to change; and she put out one hand to stop him, looking at him with a face so worn and haggard with emotion that the words he was uttering died unspoken on his lips.

'Lion,' she said abruptly, 'I am going to tell you something. I have always said I must tell a clergyman some day,

and you are so good and right-minded that, boy as you are, I would rather tell you than any other. Besides, you have blamed me for urging my child to marry you when her heart was not yours ; and I want to justify myself to you. It would not be a justification to most men, but your love is nobler than most men's ; and it was for her sake, and for the sake of the love I bear her, my first-born child, that I did it. I would do worse things now for the same reason if by doing them I could save her from the punishment which for the last twelve years I have felt to be hanging over her—the punishment of my sin.'

'Your *sin*!' repeated Lion. He really thought the poor woman's head was affected ; but pale and troubled as she looked, there was nothing of wildness in her manner. Her next question, however, was a strange one.

'Whom do you think Sybil is like?'

'Her father, is she not?' he said wonderingly. 'Not that I ever saw him, but my mother says so ; and she resembles that portrait of him very strongly.'

'She resembles far more someone whom you have never seen a portrait of—his sister ! When I first knew him he and that sister lived together. Their parents had been dead some time, leaving her as a sacred legacy to his care, and most fully he discharged the trust. He was vice-consul at Genoa, and she was a girl of fifteen, twelve years his junior, and kept house for him. I do not think that he had ever let her out of his sight for a day till he came to England on a short visit of business in the year he met me. Then he fell in love with me, and we were married, and went back to Italy together.'

She paused for a moment to take breath. Lion did not interrupt her. He felt awed, almost nervous, and, expectant of something painful, he knew not what. Where was this Amy Dysart whom no one had ever mentioned before ? After a minute Mrs Dysart went on in the same low appealing tone,—

'I am not going to tell you how I loved my husband. To a young man like you it would not be seemly ; and I could not do it. You think you love Sybil perhaps, but the love of a passionate woman is more intense than that of any man, and you are younger than I was. I was six-and-twenty, nearly the same age as my husband ; and if a woman of that age loves passionately she generally loves jealously as well. He was worth my affection, however. Ah me ! how well worth it ! Even now I don't dare to think how happy we might have been but for the girl.'

Again she paused for a moment, and then went on, in a sharper tone :—

‘Don’t you understand? It was her perpetual presence—not any hatefulness in herself for which I hated her. She was a foolish, impetuous, gushing creature, spoilt to the last degree by the indulgence of her brother ; but that was nothing to me. For his sake I would have liked a worse girl if she would have let us alone ; but that was what she would not do. I wanted to be a perfect wife to my husband, to worship and serve him in all things. I would have knelt and kissed his feet if he had wished it ; but in return I wanted to have him all to myself, and to myself alone. That is a wife’s right. Sybil would have had it with you, perhaps ; but *I*—I never did. Always and always she came between us. Always she was there, sitting on his knee, kissing him, clinging to his arm out walking, working for him when he was away, flying into his arms the moment he came home. She might have been his wife herself for all a wife could get to do for or say to him ; and, to put me at a still greater disadvantage, I was not strong that first year. Sybil was born before the end of it ; and weakness and languor prevented my going about much or taking the upper hand as I might have done. He thought I had it, of course. He loved us both, and tried his best to be just to us ; but with that blooming, lovely girl always in front of me, how could I help feeling my own worn looks and feebleness, and hating her daily more for the contrast which I fancied he must feel too? We never quarrelled vulgarly. She was too soft and simple to fight with, but we led a miserable life together, and morning, noon, and night I tried to think how it could be ended, how she could be sent away !

‘At last I succeeded. Louis, my husband, was given the consulship at Fiume, an out-of-the-way place on the Adriatic ; and then I made a stand, and said Amy must not go there with us. He must send her to a finishing school in England instead. I had often urged it on him before, pointing out that it was cruelty to her to bring her up in such a way, that she was shamefully ignorant, *gauche*, unconventional, and unlike other girls ; but while we were in Genoa he would not listen to me. The climate agreed with her, her mother had died of consumption, what masters he could get for her she had had ; and last, not least, it was “so nice” for me and the dear child to be together. Surely no finishing school could be so good for her as *my* society !

‘His promotion, however, brought the change I was longing for. Fiume is a small, dull, not over-healthy place ; there was another child by then ; and the consulate where we were to live had very limited accommodation even for ourselves. I renewed my persuasions, and, as the perpetual iteration of them had begun to convince even him that there might be shortcomings in his idol, he at last gave in. Perhaps, too, he had perceived that she was not so happy of late as she had been. At any rate, when I told him of a small and very select school at Brighton, the mistress of which was a friend of mine, and where she could be received as parlour boarder, and have every care and indulgence, he fell in with the idea ; and though she shed floods of tears at the thought, and made herself more annoying than usual by her assumption of misery and ill-usage, I would not allow him to give way. She went at last—six months after our arrival at Fiume ; and—neither he nor I ever saw her again.’

‘*Mrs Dysart !*’ exclaimed Lion hoarsely. What ideas were whirling in his brain he could not have said himself ; but Mrs Dysart looked at him with a faint, bitter smile which quelled them.

‘Don’t be afraid, I did not hire an assassin to kill her on the road ! She got safely to school. It was a good enough one on the whole, and school was very good for her. She might have been as happy as any other girl there, if she had chosen ; but, of course, she did not choose. I knew that beforehand. I knew her letters would be nothing but exaggerated descriptions of feelings, woes, and injuries ; and so I paid no heed to them, but took care, when they were addressed to Louis, that he did not see them, and either answered them sharply and chillingly in his name, or not at all. It was easy to manage it, for I had desired the schoolmistress to put all her letters home under a separate cover to me ; and it was easy, too, living in the consulate, as I did, and being so entirely in my husband’s confidence, to see the letters he wrote her, and stop any which complained of not having heard from her lately or often. He did make a good deal of fuss about that at first, and grumbled when the maid brought nothing but a bald little note to me (which I read him, of course), with a message for him at the end ; but men never think so much of letters as women, and Louis was a vile correspondent himself. The children, too, were at their most engaging age, and he worshipped them as much as I did ; so when he spoke of Amy, I laughed at him,

and reminded him that she was only a girl, and, girl-like, wrapped up in her new friends and employments, and that it would be selfish and absurd to reproach her for the fact, or accuse her of coldness or neglect. By degrees, indeed, she seemed to verify my words ; for she wrote much more seldom and briefly. She had grown to feel herself uncared for, and to believe at last what I had so often tried to impress on her—that a sister counted for very little in a man's heart when he had a wife and children. Yet for all this, the shock was a terrible one, even to me, when we heard that she was—*gone!*

'She had disappeared, run away from school at night, taking her trinkets, and leaving a note to say that it would be no use to follow her, for she had gone to someone whom she knew loved her, and whom she loved with all her heart. The mistress did not write to us, however, until she had made every inquiry after the missing girl and without result ; and though we took up the search immediately, and my husband even went to England and hunted high and low for her, all our efforts were fruitless. We never got the slightest clue.'

'Did you not advertise ?'

'Not under her own name. That was on account of Lord Dysart. Amy was his wife's name ; and the chief part of our income depended on him. He is a proud, vindictive, eccentric old man, and would have cast off Louis and our children at once if even the shadow of such disgrace had reached him. Amy's pet name was Sunflower, however. Her brother had never called her anything else, and under that name he filled the papers with advertisements to her. They were no use. She never answered one by word or sign, and what was strangest, no suspicion seemed to attach to any living soul with whom she had been connected at Miss Tylor's. One could only think that she had run away with some scamp whom she had met in the square or on the pier—for, of course, as a parlour boarder she had more liberty than others—and in that belief my poor husband at last returned. He never reproached me even then. He never suspected about the letters for one moment. He was grateful for my too evident anxiety and sorrow ; but—he was never the same again. A nasty cold which he had caught in England seemed to cling to him ; and after some months he got so weak that the doctors ordered him entire change of air and scene. We went to Genoa by easy stages, because "*she* loved the place," and he thought perchance *she* might wander back to it ; and while we were there we got the last tidings of

her. A parcel was forwarded to us from Fiume, containing a little gold locket of Amy's, with her mother's hair in it, and a letter in a strange hand to say that if the relations who had cast her on the world by their selfish cruelty cared to learn her fate, they might be relieved to know that she was dead. She had died of consumption about three months before the letter was written, leaving the enclosed locket to be sent, "with her fond love to the brother who had *once* loved her." That was all. There was no signature, no address, no clue of any sort to the sender.'

Again Mrs Dysart stopped, this time with a sort of gasp. Her voice had sunk to a mere whisper when she went on.

'Louis died within the same year. It was consumption too with him ; the same disease, and caught in the same way as his sister's. I remember some of her earlier letters were full of complaints of the cold and damp of England, and of a teasing cough, which would not leave her. I did not let him see them, because if I had, he would have sent for her immediately, and I thought it was all folly and peevishness, and told her so in my answer. That was part of my sin, and that part seemed visited on me when he died ; died blessing me and his babes, and reproofing himself—only himself—to the last.

'There, Lion, now you know the whole ; and now, perhaps, you know too why it is that I am harsh to my child at present. It is to save her from the punishment which otherwise may fall on her instead of me, which I have dreaded so long, and tried so hard to ward off. Yes, ever since that day when, with my husband's dead body in the room, and little Amy (I called her by her second name from that hour) clinging to me in Amy Dysart's own caressing way, I read that awful verse in the Bible about "the iniquities of the fathers being visited upon the children unto the third or fourth generation."

'For my iniquity has not been visited on me. It might have been could I have braved Louis's loathing and contempt, and owned my wrong-doing ; but I loved him too well, I was too cowardly, and so I held my peace, and left the legacy to them, my innocent ones ; more especially to her on whom Providence seems to have stamped that hapless girl's name and face as a living memorial of my sin. Lion, I have *tried* to atone for it. I have prayed ; I have done penance. I have shut myself from the world. My whole life since has been one long payment ; and when I saw her so lovely, so good, when you loved her, and I had won you for her husband, I thought I had succeeded.

I thought God was satisfied. Ah me! He has dashed down my hard-earned happiness with a cruel hand, and in this Vane, this man of whom I hear nothing that is good, has raised up a worse scourge to my poor child than any even I had feared for her. What am I to do? Would you have me give her up to it when a little severity may yet save her? I am not thinking of you now, but of her. What would you have me do for *her*?

'Do? Go to her. Be kind to her,' cried Lion impetuously. 'Mrs Dysart, I can't say anything to you about the past. I might, if you were anyone else, but you are like a second mother to me; and, however much you may have been to blame, you have suffered too—terribly. How do you know that that was not your punishment? How do you know that you are not dressing up a bogey of your own imagination and love of ruling, and calling it Providence? Nay, that by doing so you have not brought on you this very pain and trouble from which you are now suffering? If you had left Sybil's choice freer, gone out into the world with her— But there! it is no use talking of what has been; only, for God's sake, don't go on with your present plan. Don't try to force your child's heart by harshness, just when she needs you most. Tyranny will never turn her from her lover, but it may turn her from you; and how will you save her then from any ill that may threaten her? Mrs Dysart, you will not be able to do so. It will be you who will have driven her to it.'

Lion was gone; and for a long time after the door had closed behind him Mrs Dysart sat alone in her room, weeping and thinking. She had given in—not at once, indeed, but finally; and she was glad to do so. Her heart was yearning for her child, and this late unburdening of her long and sorely-tortured conscience had had a softening and salutary effect on her; yet she could not yield all in a moment—not openly at any rate. When Jenny brought her up her tea she put her arms round the girl and kissed her, saying, 'God bless you, my darling!' with a tenderness which made Jenny cling to her in response and augur happily of the result of Lion's visit; but she sent the girl away immediately afterwards, and sat on—waiting.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before she made up her mind. Sybil would be in bed then, so she would go to her, and her eyes brightened as she pictured to herself the lovely shamed face lifted from its pillow at her entrance, the grateful pressure of the soft arms whose caresses she had voluntarily put from her for so many days and nights.

Her whole heart was fluttering with motherly tenderness as she tapped at Sybil's door. There was no answer. The house was all quiet and asleep, and she entered; but the next moment a shrill cry rang from basement to attic; and Jenny, from her little room adjoining, heard a heavy, crashing fall.

When she reached the door her mother was lying on the carpet, face downwards, beside Sybil's bed. There was no one else there. The pillow was smooth and unruffled, the clothes not even turned down: *Sybil was gone!*

CHAPTER III.

COUNTERWEAVING.

WHEN Mrs Hamilton left her brother in the way recorded in the previous volume, she did a thing so unusual with her that more than one of the household wondered if anything was wrong. She asked the first person she met if her husband was in his study and alone, and being answered in the affirmative, tapped at the door, and entered, without waiting to be answered.

Even Dr Hamilton was taken by surprise; though having seen from the window Gareth's arrival, he guessed his wife's visit had something to do with that young man. Still, he changed colour slightly, and the papers in his hands fluttered as he looked up at her, saying,—

‘Well, Helen?’

‘I wish to speak to you,’ she answered, the colour coming and going in her face in a curious spotty manner, her eyes bright and staring. ‘Gareth is upstairs, and has told me something which it is necessary you should hear. He says he is engaged to be married.’

‘Indeed!’ The doctor's eyebrows went up a little; yet more as if surprise were the proper thing to show than as if he felt it. ‘Well, I am not sorry. It is time he settled down.’

‘You think so? Perhaps you will be glad when you hear the name of the person who has got hold of him. It is Dysart—a Miss Amy—Sybil—Dysart.’

She said each word slowly, with her eyes riveted on her husband; but if she had expected him to change colour or show

any emotion, she was disappointed. Perhaps he had heard the news before. He met her gaze quite calmly and gravely.

‘A Miss Dysart? No, I do not know any reason why I should be particularly glad of that. Do you?’

‘Do *I*?’ The poor woman was almost choking; yet pride struggled feebly with her indignation, and the doctor’s equanimity baffled her. ‘Do you dare to ask me such a question? Dr Hamilton, I am going to ask you one instead. People about here call you a truthful, upright man, you know. That sounds strange between you and me; but I am asking you nothing about the past at present, and we are not young people now: you can have no object in lying to me. What connection is there between you and this girl, Amy Dysart? I have a right to put the question to you.’

‘You have a perfect right to do so,’ said the doctor gravely—he had risen, but there was no anger in his face or manner at his wife’s insulting words; rather a certain quiet sadness—‘and I will answer you with perfect candour. I would have done so long ago about the past, had you allowed me. There is no connection whatever between me and Miss Dysart.’

‘*None?* You will tell me, perhaps, that you have no interest in her either.’

‘If you ask me, I shall, most certainly. She is a young person in whom I do not take the slightest interest.’

The strained, incredulous expression of his wife’s eyes had something painful in it. She wrung her hands together as she answered him:

‘You can say that! Oh, why degrade yourself so to deceive me? Do you think I did not follow you the day Belle Beverley was here, and hear you ask her the name of the village where this girl lives, and even see you jot it down in your note-book?’

‘And if you did,’ said the doctor, coming forward and speaking with a sudden warmth and energy which could hardly have failed to convince the most sceptical, ‘you have no right to assume that I am deceiving you. I did note down the address; and what is more (as you do not seem to have followed me there), I went to it on the Tuesday after. For reasons of my own, into which it would be needlessly painful to us both to enter, I wished to find out whether Mrs Beverley’s account of this young woman was correct.’

‘And was it?’

‘Not exactly. The girl comes of unimpeachable parentage,

her father having been a man of some position, the cousin of a peer ; and her mother a person of the rigidest virtue and respectability, according to the common acceptation of those terms. If you will take my word for it, however, Mrs Dysart is at heart one of the most vicious, scheming, and heartless of women ; and, from what I gather, I should think her daughter was likely to be the same. By an odd chance I happened to see Gareth himself walking with the young woman ; and I learnt, even from the talk of the old country folks in the neighbourhood, that she was a fast, flighty sort of young lady, and positively known to be engaged to the curate of the parish, while "keeping company" as their phrase is, with your brother. Apparently she has now jilted the former ; and a good thing for him ! Helen, my dear, you wrong me entirely in this. I have no interest in the girl. I am sorry that Gareth has had anything to do with her. You are indignant at the idea of such a marriage, and you are in the right to be so. It would not be a good one for your brother, nor for you, nor for me ; not well in any sense. Trust me for once. We do not work together much in general ; but if you will let me co-operate with you in this matter, I will promise to do so heartily. Gar had better marry even Belle Beverley than this girl ; and—he is easily led. Don't bully him, that's all. Just treat the matter with ridicule, and ten to one it will die out of itself. His fancies are never very long-lasting.'

Gareth had been left nearly half-an-hour alone, and had had time to get rather impatient of his solitude when his sister returned to him, looking quite her usual self again, and with no trace of illness or agitation in her appearance.

'Forgive me for leaving you so long, dear,' she said, sitting down and taking up her work with her usual sedateness ; 'but I felt so unwell—at least' (correcting herself with her usual truthfulness) 'I have been very much worried of late, and it has upset me ; but I was kept longer than I meant to be.'

'Don't apologise,' said Gareth languidly. 'I thought that you had fainted from the joy of hearing that I was about to reform and *ranger* myself at last. You haven't told me yet what you think of my news.'

'How am I to think of it except as a bad joke ?' said Mrs Hamilton coldly. 'You are not in earnest, of course ?'

'Upon my soul I am, most dismally so.'

'It would be dismally so if you were. Do you really mean

that you have been foolish enough to allow this young woman to entrap you ?'

'I don't know about the entrapping, and I'd rather you didn't use the word, if you don't mind,' said Gareth, a little haughtily. 'I certainly mean that I have fallen in love with Miss Dysart, and have been accepted ; and that, if her vicious old mother gives in, I mean to marry her.'

'Then let us hope the vicious old mother will do no such thing. I am glad to hear that she is at least more decent than her daughter. Pray, what does the latter mean to do with her other lover ?'

'Her other— I really don't know what you mean,' said Gareth, flushing slightly. He was well aware that he had said nothing about Lionel Ashleigh.

'Don't you ?' said Mrs Hamilton, with a cold smile. 'Then she is worse than I supposed. My dear Gareth, I am not good at hypocrisy. Your news didn't surprise me, as I happen to have heard of this girl before. Young women who go on with men, as she seems to be in the habit of doing, are apt to get talked about. She has played fast and loose with one man already, and will probably do the same for you.'

'She will do no such thing,' cried Gareth warmly. 'My dear Helen, you don't know Sybil. Why, she is the purest, sweetest—'

'Girl who ever went out to meet one man while she was engaged to another ! There, there, Gareth, we understand all that sort of thing ; so don't let us argue over what, after all, is only a bit of sentiment. This angel is not a gilded one, I suppose ? You would have said so if she were.'

'She hasn't a penny so far as I know,' said Gareth drily, and thinking of what Mrs Jacobson had said as to Sybil's horse having been a present from her former lover.

'Ah ! And you owe more pennies already than you have or are likely to have ; so, in any case, matrimony would be out of the question. Don't let us go on with the subject. You'll dine here, of course, won't you ? The doctor will be glad to see you.'

'Thanks, no. You've made my visit so much too pleasant already, that I don't think I ought to prolong it. Frankly, Nell, I must own I had expected—'

'That, having allowed some artful woman to make a fool of you for the hundredth time in your life, I would assist her in your ruin ? No, Gareth, I am not perhaps such a faithful

admirer of yours as that silly, soft-hearted Belle Beverley ; but I care too much for you to harm you, and I don't sympathise with folly.'

'I'm quite aware of that,' said Gareth, with a slight sneer. 'You're mistaken, however, in thinking that there is anything artful about Sybil Dysart, or that Belle Beverley is an admirer of mine. Of course, as the latter's cousin—'

Mrs Hamilton got up impatiently.

'Pshaw, Gareth ! leave off that kind of talk here. A pretty, wealthy, much-run-after woman (for, though she's not at all in my style, I don't deny her those qualities) doesn't stay single for the sake of her cousins only. And that reminds me, as you go, or at anyrate pass there oftener than I do, would you take charge of this card-case of hers ? With her usual abominable carelessness she left it here when she last called, and it is too costly to send by post.'

Of a truth, though Mrs Hamilton had not deigned to accept in words the league submitted to her by her husband, she had carried out his suggestions with most religious fidelity, and with the more readiness, because (as I have said) she knew even less of Belle Beverley than the doctor did, and had more liking for her. When Gareth was gone, indeed, she went so far as to sit down and write a little note to the widow,—

'MY DEAR ISABELLE,—I fear that story of yours about Gareth is only too true, and that he has even been trapped into some sort of an engagement. Of course, it will not last. In fact, he cannot marry her under any circumstances ; so if you see him, don't let him know that I have told you anything about it ; but please use all your friendly influence to make him forget what I am sure is only a passing fancy.—Your affectionate cousin,

'HELEN HAMILTON.'

'He won't go there to-night ; he will be too cross at my snubbing him,' she said to herself as she sealed and despatched the missive ; 'but he must take that card-case sooner or later, and then he may remember my other words. They were true ones. I could not have said them otherwise, even to save him from that shameless girl.'

And then Mrs Hamilton went up to the nursery to visit her two youngest children. Somehow, unconsciously even to herself, she was feeling happier since that interview in the study than she had done for many a long day ; and that evening,

when the doctor happened to be called out to a patient just before dinner, he was surprised to find that both the meal and his wife were waiting for him on his return.

Mrs Hamilton was right in her prescience. Gareth did not go to Mrs Beverley's that evening. He dined at a *café*, which was frightfully hot and stuffy; went to the theatre, which was hotter and stuffier still; and to bed in anything but a good humour. He had meant to write to Sybil; but he had nothing pleasant to tell her; and after all his boastings of how cordial his sister would be in her welcome of her new sister, he did not care to repeat what had actually occurred.

What had come over Helen, by the way, to make her so confoundedly disagreeable? She was hard enough on men in general, he knew; but she had always been so kind to him, and had urged him to marry so frequently, that he had counted quite confidently on her support and assistance. Could it be that she really knew more of Sybil than he did? Yet, no! looking back on the exquisite purity of face and mien which characterised his love, even Gareth, sceptic as he was, could not wrong her by the doubt. She was infinitely too good for him, and he knew it; but what, in heaven's name, then, had made Helen so virulently opposed to her? He could not answer the question at all, and fell asleep crosser than ever for his failure.

Next day was worse still—hotter, closer, stuffier; and on strolling down to the office of the paper on which he was employed, he found to his disgust that he was expected to write a two-column article on a subject of all others the least interesting to him. It would actually necessitate some 'reading up,' and with the thermometer at ninety in the shade, that idea was too much altogether for Gareth's equanimity; and he sauntered away to the club in hopes of finding some distraction from it. Even the Park had a scorched, arid, end-of-the-season look about it. People were flocking out of town already, as unusually hot weather has a trick of making them do in this country where heat and sunshine are rare things with us; and as Gareth looked for and missed sundry familiar carriages among the throng crowding the 'Drive' that afternoon, he mentally cursed Mrs Dysart, and even cast an angry thought to Sybil. How pleasant it would be to be doing his courting under the shady limes of the garden at Hillbrow, and how stupid and weak it was of Sybil not to manage to hold her own better and make her mother hear reason! How mad and idiotic he had been to put himself in such a position at all!

It was just then that he chanced to put his hand in his pocket, and in doing so touched Belle Beverley's card-case. He took it out, wondering what it was, and the sight of the little gold and turquoise trifle reminded him, first, that if there was a cool spot in London it was generally to be found in the owner's drawing-room ; and, next, that the best cup of tea he ever got anywhere was to be procured in the same place ; on the strength of both which thoughts he called a hansom, and had himself driven to Gresham Gardens, Kensington, without delay.

'I wonder if the "Prince" will be there,' he said to himself with a sneer ; 'or if not, what other man will be lounging on the sofa, looking unutterables into Belle's eyes, and fancying himself the only one who has ever done so. Well, they won't interfere with me, and I sha'n't be spiteful enough to spoil sport. After all, I only want to do Helen's errand and get a cup of tea.'

He got more, however. Mrs Beverley was at home, and alone ; and on being admitted he was shown at once into a small drawing-room, deliciously darkened, and whose delicately-tinted walls, matted floor, and furniture coverings of sea-blue linen embroidered with quaint bunches of ox-eyed daisies and green oats, had a cool and country-like appearance infinitely refreshing to the jaded town-goer. Even more refreshing was the vista seen through an arch draped with curtains of filmy lace, of the small but lofty conservatory beyond, all a tangle of feathery-fronded ferns and trailing emerald creepers, dripping and glittering with diamond drops from the spray of a fountain whose tinkling splash as it fell back into its marble basin had a soothing sound in itself.

Mrs Beverley came to meet him from this latter retreat as he entered. She was holding a pot of tall white lilies under the spray of the fountain for refreshment, and as she put it down, and held out her shapely hand to greet him, he could not help thinking of his sister's carefully qualified compliment, and telling himself that, whether Belle were Mrs Hamilton's 'style' or not, there could be no doubt of her beauty ; and that even by the side of Sybil Dysart's fairer and more youthful loveliness she would shine 'as musk-rose beside primrose,' by contrast, if not by comparison.

She was looking different from her usual self too, he thought : different and better. The too-artificial bloom which generally coloured her cheek was exchanged for a dusky pallor, to which an unwontedly sweet, almost tender expression in the large dark eyes imparted an air of softness and languor which was infinitely

fascinating. Her dress too seemed made for the day and room, a soft, simply-draped gown of creamy Indian muslin, slightly open at the full waxen throat, and made with a very short waist gathered in under the gracious curve of the bosom, and girdled with a broad sash of pale, primrose-coloured silk; while her shining raven hair fell in two rippling, loosely-woven plaits almost to her knees.

‘Gareth ! How nice to see you !’ she said, warmly ; ‘and how good of you to come out to visit a lonely little woman in this scorching weather ! Come and sit down. No, not there. This is your favourite chair, and you are going to be rewarded by having it. Do you know that once or twice while you have been away I have—*almost* missed you ! That is why I did not wait to put up my hair, and “titivate” generally before I said “Show him in.” Besides, it is too hot for company trappings ; and I know you don’t care for them. Is it not cooler here than in the room ?’

She had put him into a deep bamboo chair, cushioned luxuriously in spotless white sateen, which felt as cool to the touch as it looked to the eye ; and had seated herself close by, on a low ottoman backed by stands of yellow azaleas and shaded by a huge tree-fern. Gareth felt all his weariness, irritation, and temper fading away as he leant back and looked at her. Certainly, when Belle chose, she knew how to make a home delicious and a man comfortable. What a paradise this seemed after his fusty lodgings, and the glaring, smoke-scented club-rooms—ay, even after the meagre homeliness of Farmer Dyson’s best parlour, and the long dull hours so difficult to get through in a place like Chadleigh End, when not spent in dancing attendance on a mistress who was seldom if ever visible ! Involuntarily he wondered if Sybil’s drawing-room could be anything in this style (it seemed too absurd at the moment that he should never have seen it), or whether it might not rather belong to the order of the genteelly prim in which elderly provincial widows with limited incomes are wont to rejoice. To be sure, there was nothing primly genteel about Sybil ; but then she was a *rara avis*, and one could not expect the rest of her family to resemble her simply because she happened to belong to them. He felt quite sure as he hesitated between tea and iced coffee, which the pretty Spanish page-boy brought in unbidden, and helped himself to strawberries and cream heaped up lusciously on plates of opal-tinted Venetian glass, that if he were self-sacrificing enough to marry Sybil, neither he nor she

would ever be able to indulge in luxuries of that sort ; and he sighed as the thought crossed him. Gareth Vane like luxuries.

Mrs Beverley looked up at him with a smile, half-playful, half-kind.

'Gareth,' she said, 'that's the second time you've sighed since you've been here ; and now that I've had time to look at you, I can't help fancying from your face there's something wrong. What is it ? Anything you can tell me ?'

She said it just as sweetly and delicately as Sybil herself could have done ; but there was something in the sympathetic expression of her large black eyes which Gareth found hard to face, and he turned his away as he answered,—

'Wrong with me ? No ; nonsense ! What should ail me, except the heat ? and that's enough to make any man sigh. This is the only cool place I've seen since I came back to town or while I was away ; for my lodgings were like a brick-kiln for heat, and smelt like one as well, so far as the farmyard-straw was concerned. Don't abuse me if I am stupid to-day, Belle. The mere ease of this chair and sight of all that cool green prettiness is enough to make a man silent with pleasure. Besides, I've been tramping about in the sun all day.'

'Sit still then, and be as silent as you like,' said Belle, laughing. 'I am going to try over a new song in the inner room, and you can tell me what you think of it. If you're very good, you shall even have a cigarette—it may kill some of the aphides on my geraniums.'

She brought him the cigarette, and even lit it for him, bending over him and resting the warm, creamy-tinted tips of the fingers of one hand on his shoulders as she did so ; but any over-tenderness in the action was qualified in the same moment by the frank good-nature of her smile as she remarked,—

'Gareth, do you know I can remember the first time I ever lit a cigar for you ? You had got into some scrape, and Tom had been lecturing you. I was little more than a bride then ; but I felt as if you were going to be a brother to me already, and I couldn't think of anything but a cigar to comfort you under the infliction. Ah, dear ! I am getting quite an old sister now, am I not ? But, at least, I know how to give you the old comfort.'

And then, before he could answer, she went away into the drawing-room, and sitting down to the piano began to sing.

Belle Beverley had a rich, powerful, contralto voice ; a voice twenty times richer and more powerful than Sybil's, as Gareth,

who knew what good music was far better than poor Lionel, was well aware ; and when she sang sad or tender songs as she did now, there was a passionate thrill in every note which, coming straight from her own heart, could hardly fail to touch that of her hearer.

The sun was low, and a fresh breeze had sprung up, when Gareth went home that afternoon ; but despite the iced coffee, the dew-dripped ferns, and cool conservatory, the blood was coursing more hotly through his veins than it had done a few hours ago. He went to the theatre again that evening, and the early dawn was flushing St Paul's with pale rose-colour, and the sparrows beginning to twitter in the eaves, before he returned to the lodgings which he had quitted in disgust the morning before. But the fever of excitement had faded out by then, and daylight woke a new course of feelings in the senses jaded by satiety. Sybil's photograph, which, framed in velvet and gold, occupied the place of honour on his mantelpiece, *vice* half-a-score of rival ones, seemed to look at him with the dumb, helpless pathos of some delicate blossom that a careless foot has trodden on ; and a frown came to Gareth's brow as he gazed on it.

'Poor little flower ! ' he muttered ; ' it would be a shame to play you false after all. I have been a fool to-day, but it's over now, and no one the worse but myself. Sybil's fault too, for treating me as she does ! What does she think a man is made of ? Egad ! the coldest-blooded curate couldn't stand it : and she forgets she's asking something of a sacrifice of me. It seemed a sacrifice to-day, sitting there in Belle Beverley's dove-cot ; and what had come over Belle too ? I've not seen her so soft or—or *womanly* for years. The heat, I suppose ; and by to-morrow most likely she'll be in one of her tiger-cat moods by way of counterpoise, and I shall feel the claws when I go there to dinner on Friday. I wish for Sybil's sake I hadn't promised to go. What's the good of making up my mind to turn over a new leaf for her sake if I run and put my head bang into the old meshes ? God knows, though, I thought they were broken for me long enough ago. Ay, and they were, until to-day.'

He was silent for a moment, and the rosy flush of dawn creeping higher into the sky flooded the upper part of the room with crimson light, and cast a warm glow over the photograph, on which, while languidly undressing, his eyes were still turned. The pictured face seemed to kindle into life beneath the sud-

den colour, blotting out the coarser beauty of that older and harder one which for a few hours had charmed his senses away, and shaming him by the tender purity of its innocent, exquisite sweetness.

‘By Jove, they shall be now!’ he said, aloud. ‘If the child loves me well enough to hold to me, I’ll hold to her. I’ve spoilt her chances down there, so if she spoils mine it will be all fair; only it must be *her* doing. She must take her choice to have me or leave me. We’ll have no more half measures, and so I’ll tell her. Let me see, when is Belle’s dinner? Friday. That’s the day after to-morrow. What if I’m a good boy, break with her, and go down to Chadleigh End instead? One word of mouth is better than ten by letter, but I must write to her to say I am coming, and name the time and place of meeting. I think she’ll not demur. I’ll put it strongly anyhow; for if she does, it’ll be for the last time. I sha’n’t trouble her again.’

His writing materials were lying on the table, and as he opened the blotting-book the first thing that caught his eye was the sheet of paper on which he had meant to write to Sybil the previous day. He had got as far as the address and date and the first line, ‘My own darling little white lily,’ and then had broken off, meaning to fill it up on his return from the office. Why that had not been done we have seen: but now, as it lay there, it seemed like an encouragement to him to finish it at once; and, with a half wish to put himself out of temptation by giving himself no time for further thought, he sat down, dashed off a short, impetuous note, telling Sybil she must meet him at a certain place and hour on the day but one following, unless she wished never to see him again, signed, sealed, and addressed it, and having put it outside to be posted, finished undressing in haste, and flung himself, thoroughly wearied out, on to his bed.

CHAPTER IV.

A NIGHT ON THE HEATH.

It will have been surmised by now where Sybil had gone on the evening when Mrs Dysart went to her room to give her the forgiveness she had promised, and found her absent; but in order to explain the matter *in extenso*, I had better give Gareth’s letter as it was written.

*BACON CHAMBERS, ARUNDEL STREET,
STRAND, *Tuesday.*

'MY OWN DARLING LITTLE WHITE LILY,—I have been unable to write to you before on account of work, heat and horrid disagreeables of every sort which have pressed on me, and made me out of heart, out of health, and out of everything but love. My dearest, I must see and talk to you. Circumstances have made it absolutely necessary that I should do so ; that is, if we are to maintain our present relations to one another, and if you love me as you pretend. To be frank, my people find it hard to believe that you do. I had hoped to send you a more loving message from them ; but how can you blame Helen for doubting my sweetheart's affection when it rests on nothing but my own word ? She loves me, and has made sacrifices for me before now, as I know she did for her husband when she married him. How is she to believe in the love of a girl, who engages herself to a man and denies him the commonest rights of friendship ; and expects fidelity from a lover whom she refuses even to see ? My dear Sybil, it is absurd and preposterous ; and Helen is justly offended. Either you want to get rid of me, or you don't. If you don't, you had better meet me beside the old gravel pit, on Chadleigh Heath, the day after to-morrow. I know your tyrannical old mother generally lies down after dinner, and leaves you free to escape to your own room, or for a stroll in the garden ; so you must manage to let the stroll take you a little further on that evening ; for it is too hot to be racing about and travelling by rail in the daytime, and there is a down train which stops at Chadleigh Heath Station at three minutes past eight in the evening, and will just suit me. I can run down by it, meet you by the old gravel pit hard by, and have time to say what I want to you before catching the up train which leaves at half-past eight. It will be rather sharp work, however, and you must be punctual. Remember, *I* shall be there whatever happens ; and if I don't see you I shall believe that your love for me was all a pretence, and shall curse the day that I was ever fool enough to fancy otherwise.'

There were a few more words, pretty, coaxing ones, in conclusion ; but Sybil hardly saw them. This was the whole gist of the letter, and this was enough to occupy her. It was no wonder she grew nervous and fretful over it. Gareth had written on Tuesday and had said, underlining it, 'Meet me

the day after to-morrow,' but the 'day after to-morrow' would be Thursday, and this was Thursday! It was to-day he was expecting her. There was no time even to answer the letter, or to demur to hour or place, however much she might have wished to do so; no time for anything but to telegraph, and to do that in a little village like Chadleigh End, where the postmistress knew everybody, and started half the gossip in the place, was a thing from which Sybil's shy maidenliness shrank with natural repugnance. Besides, what could she say in a telegram which would satisfy Gareth, and persuade him of her love while denying him his wish? If only she had had time to write!

And then, as a deep sigh followed the wish, she caught Jenny's large eyes fixed anxiously on her from the opposite side of the breakfast-table; and though the glance was quickly and delicately averted, Sybil felt that her sister was perfectly aware of who had written the letter which she had found lying on her plate when she came down to breakfast, and was blaming the individual in question for the unhappiness she could not help showing in her face.

There was nothing in it after all to make some girls unhappy. To the vulgar mind, indeed, it might have seemed a rather pleasantly-exciting matter, this slipping out on a summer's evening to meet one's lover, and returning home with his kisses on one's lips through the balmy summer twilight. There was no real difficulty about it either; no petty espionage or tyrannical supervision to baffle. Just as freely as her letters reached her, unquestioned and uncommented on, so she was free to come and go as she pleased, and with even less of comment and question; seeing that since their unhappy division her mother never came into the dining-room to meals, or took any notice by word or sign of her daughter's doings.

On the other hand, however, Sybil felt that this freedom rested in part on the promise she had voluntarily given to her mother on the day when she announced her intention of breaking with Lionel Ashleigh.

'Mamma, I cannot give Gareth up. I love him and he loves me; but I will not marry him till you give your consent. I will not even see him till you say I may. I will be content with his letters if you will only not press me about the other one any more.'

And Mrs Dysart had not pressed her—in words. Lionel's name was not mentioned. His presence was suffered to become a banished one. Nobody watched her. Nobody said

‘Stay within doors.’ If she did so, it was of her own will, and for shame of being seen while her name was still the chief subject for gossip in the place.

So far she had been let alone, and she had kept her word. Would it be wrong to break it now?

Puzzling the question feebly in her own conscience, Sybil did not think so. After all, her mother had not accepted the compact. She had said nothing, and despite her daughter’s adherence to it, had maintained a line of conduct which could hardly be called anything but pressure, put it as you would. If she had been kind and loving in her disapproval, Sybil would have shrunk from displeasing her further; but her harshness made an excuse in itself for disobedience; and if by giving way to it she were to anger Gareth—if, having lost her mother’s love, she were to lose his, what would be left to her? For she was sure that he meant what he said, and she would not blame him for it. It was no sin in him to have loved her. *He* was breaking no engagement in doing so. What wonder that his sister thought him hardly used? The pity was that he should have fixed on such an unseemly hour and place instead of giving her time to arrange a visit to Mrs Jacobson, or some more decorous way of meeting; perhaps even to make a last appeal to her mother; anything rather than be forced into conduct, which to her timid and rather narrow mind was repugnant, less from being dishonourable and undignified, than as unconventional and unladylike.

To be sure, the gravel pit alluded to was not on the road between the station or village; or in the way of ordinary pedestrians; but people driving over from Dilworth passed close by it; and suppose that any of the Ashleighs should do so and see her; or that Lionel himself should be visiting any of his parishioners in that direction, and come upon her talking with her new lover! The mere idea of anything so terrible made her flush and shiver; and it was some consolation to her to think that the lateness of the hour would render either event highly improbable. Still, that very lateness would make her being out alone more improper, if she were to encounter anyone who knew her; and a few hot tears fell from her eyes as she decided that no girl had ever been so hardly placed before, or had met so little sympathy.

How little she guessed while she sat weeping in her room, that at that very moment Jenny (who had gone out to do the parish work for her which, as it was Lionel’s parish, she now

shrank from shamefacedly) was standing face to face with the young clergyman on the heath which her sister was going to cross later, and pleading with him to help in making the latter's situation easier for her.

The long sultry day drew to a close at last ; Jenny had come home and settled to her ordinary occupations ; Lion had kept his promise, done his unselfish task, and gone. Then the tea-bell rang. Jenny carried up her mother's little tray to her room ; and Sybil came downstairs at last to preside at the meal which the two girls partook of together in the dining-room ; dinner being a ceremony disposed of earlier in the heat of the summer months. It was not a lively repast to-day. Jenny, indeed, talked faster than usual, being in mortal dread lest her sister should have recognised the sound of Lion's step in the hall and want an explanation of it ; to avoid which she launched into rather bald anecdotes of the cottagers she had been to visit, of the want of water, and the prospect of a thunderstorm before night. She need not have been afraid, however. Even if Sybil had heard the sound, she had been far too much absorbed in her own troublesome meditations to notice or comment on it ; and while the idea of Lionel's coming to the house would not have occurred to her as possible under present circumstances, there was not sufficient interest attaching to any other visitor to distract her mind from the perplexity of her own affairs. Even Jenny's remarks she hardly heard, and when, tea being over, the younger girl proposed that they should go out for a stroll in the garden, she refused almost pettishly ; then coloured up at her own rudeness and said, 'I beg your pardon, Jenny,' with a tearful glitter in her eyes, which would have gone far to fill Jenny's with sympathetic moisture, if the latter had not been full of such joyful hopes just then, that she had no room for tears. Nay, if she were to weep at all she felt more inclined to do so for Lionel, whose retreating tread (for a refined feeling of delicacy had impelled her to keep out of his way) had sounded so sad and heavy in her ears that it seemed more just to grieve for him than for the sister, whose punishment (so she argued from her mother's softened look and embrace) would soon be over.

'The sun is still on the garden, and my head is so bad, I should only make it worse if I went out with you,' Sybil said, in explanation of her refusal. 'Besides, if I don't go, perhaps mamma will. She ought to take more exercise, and I think I shall go to my room and lie down instead. If I shouldn't

come down again, don't disturb me, Jenny. I daresay I shall go to bed early, and I don't want to be woke.'

She said the same to a servant whom she met on the stairs and who inquired after her headache. Sybil's sweet voice and manner made her a great favourite with the household.

'It is no better, thank you, Lizzie. I meant to have gone out for a turn, but the air is so hot I shall lie down instead. Don't come into my room again for fear I should be asleep. I shall not want anything else to-night.'

The fact was, an idea had come into her head, and she wanted to have leisure to carry it out. Gareth's suggestion of the garden had been foiled by Jenny's proposal to go out there, and the uncertainty of being able to get away from her if she did so ; but there was another mode of getting out which he did not know of. In Sybil's room there were two doors, one opening on to the landing, and facing Jenny's ; the other into a sort of little lobby leading to the bath-room and communicating with the downstairs regions by a narrow back staircase. There was a door at the bottom of this staircase which opened directly into the old barnyard of the whilom hostelry. You had only to pass through the latter, unlatch a little gate, and you could be out in the meadows unseen by anyone ; for only Sybil's room and the bath-room looked out that way ; and after the morning's work was done, even the servants were little likely to be going up and down the staircase which led to them. Sybil could slip out this way to her trysting-place, meet Gareth, and return without fear of interruption or of being found out, seeing that neither Jenny nor the maids would be likely to knock at her door after her injunction to the contrary ; while even if she did chance to be met on the stairs or in the yard, nothing could be simpler than to affect to be trying the air for her head. She would be in the house again before nine, and it was still light by then at this time of the year.

It was certainly darker than usual, however, when at twenty minutes to eight she opened the gate leading into the meadows, and, giving one hasty glance behind her, passed through it : and there was no coolness in the air, which she was supposed to be seeking. The sun had gone down in a mass of blurred fiery vapour, leaving behind it streaks of orange-tawny colour upon a ground of dull lurid grey. There was not even a breath of wind. The hedges under which she passed, keeping close to them to avoid observation from the house, were white with the dust which lay unstirred on leaf and twig and blossom ; and a leaden weight

seemed to press upon the hot atmosphere and bow the blithest energies beneath it.

Sybil, poor girl ! was far from feeling blithe. It was clear to her that a thunderstorm was impending, and though she did not think there was any likelihood of its breaking before she got home, the idea of Gareth having perhaps to travel back to London through it, filled her with dread, and intensified her sense of her mother's harshness to them both. It did not occur to her that it was not Mrs Dysart who had obliged him to select that hour out of the twenty-four for his journey and trysting ; or that he had arranged it simply to suit his own selfish convenience, without even a thought for that of his sweetheart. Love, the great absorver, had decided at once for him that he must have found it impossible to come down at any other time ; and, little given to rebellion as she was, she resented for his sake the unforgiving spirit which by banishing him from the place, put him to the necessity of making the journey at all.

The deserted gravel pit, beside which they were to meet, was a very old and deep one, and nearly overgrown by a tangle of blackberry and elder bushes, which overhung the broken sides with a wealth of leaf, and flower, and fruit, and flung out long curling trails of clematis and bryony to meet and clasp in the middle. Chadleigh Station, looking like a small white sentry-box in the centre of a heath, was about three hundred yards distant ; but a clump of stunted pollard oaks between shut the old pit from view, and served at the same time for a screen from behind which Sybil could watch the arrival of the train. There was no other human habitation in sight ; only in the distance a thin column of blue smoke rising above a clump of fir-trees testified to the neighbourhood of Jowl the herb-seller's hovel. There could hardly be a lonelier spot within sight of the great civiliser, steam.

She was in excellent time. She had taken care she should be so, giving herself five minutes more than the walk required in order that he might prove the reality of her love by finding her waiting for him. She had never waited in her life for Lionel ; but she was willing to do so for Gareth, willing that he should know that she loved him. He was her idol ; yet he had doubted it. Well, he should never do so any more.

Something had made the train late, however, and the five minutes had lengthened into ten before, peering anxiously through the dry dust-laden foliage of the dwarf oak trees, she saw the white puff of smoke followed by the long curving snake-line of the advancing train. It drew up at the station. There was the

usual little bustle of arrival, people getting in, people getting out, more of the latter than usual, it seemed to her; then another puff, a snort, a shriek, and off the train went again, rattling away to Leatherhead and Dorking. Sybil came hastily down from her perch. She could see the greater part of the people who had arrived trailing off in a scattered black line along the road leading to the village. Some might be coming her way, but she did not stay to look. If they were, it would not be well for her dignity to be caught thus palpably waiting for her lover; and with a shy desire of maintaining her self-respect even in his eyes, she went round to the other side of the gravel pit, and began to busy herself in gathering some of the wild-flowers which grew in profusion around its sides. She had collected quite a handful—harebells, ox-eye daisies, and big purple campanulas—when a step came behind her on the grass, dyeing her face with happy blushes, so that for the moment she bent it lower over her nosegay as if to hide the joy it could not help but show. Only for a moment, the next the thought came to her: 'He will not think I love him much if I am too absorbed in my flowers even to notice his approach,' and her bashful mood changing quickly to tender penitence, she dropped her flowers, and turned her eyes, shining with the love and gladness which filled her soul, to meet him.

Alas! there was no answering glance of greeting. The step was only that of a rough heath pony which was feeding near, and had stopped to stare at her. There was no other living thing in sight.

For the first time a dread smote on Sybil's heart. Was he not here after all? Had he not come? Was he untrue? And with a swift movement she darted to the little clump of trees, and peered eagerly through the boughs in the direction of the station. There was a porter there wheeling something along. There was a woman standing beside what looked like a gigantic bundle; these on the up platform. On the down one there were two men talking together. It was too far off to distinguish their appearance, but one was evidently a gentleman and tall; and the conviction came to her that it must be Gareth. Perhaps he had encountered some acquaintance on the way down, and unable to shake him off, was letting him talk himself out rather than rouse his suspicion by turning off at once to the gravel pit. Yes, that must be so, and to assist his effort Sybil must be careful not to show herself. So long as he was there it was all right, and she could go back to her flowers with a joyful heart, until he could get free to come to her.

But the moments passed by and he did not come. The twilight was thickening. Big coppery-grey clouds had begun to climb the heavens, blotting out the faint evening blue and the first twinkling stars ; and once the earth trembled with a low muttering sound like thunder. Sybil glanced at her watch. It was twenty minutes past eight. In ten more the up train would be in and he must go by it. What could he be thinking of ? Unable to remain where she was, she again ran to the point of espial, but with less comfort than before. The woman was still there ; but the two men were gone, and it was not for some minutes that she descried their retreating figures far on the path to Chadleigh End. For a moment a dimness came over Sybil's eyes and her heart seemed to stop ; then, once again, hope came faintly back and set it beating. Perhaps Gareth, finding it useless to shake off his friend in any other manner, was accompanying him a part of the way, and would turn back on some pretext when they reached the edge of the common, and make all haste to her side ; but what trouble his consideration for her was putting him to, and how angry and impatient he must be at the shortness of the time left to them. Ah ! if only mamma had been—

Hush ! who was that ?

It was someone coming across the common in her direction. Not Gareth : a boy with a basket on his shoulder ; and dreading to be recognised she retreated to the other side of the gravel pit, and recommenced her pretence, a sadly miserable one now, of flower-gathering. She heard his whistle draw nearer and nearer, and then break off suddenly. Had he seen her and stopped, or had he gone by ? It was all silence, she could not tell ; and the tangle of wild clematis and black-berry, behind which she had crept, hid the opposite side of the pit from her. It flashed across her mind after a minute that it would also hide her from Gareth, if he were in truth approaching and on the look-out for her ; and in the last lingering hope of seeing him she leant forward, parting the clustering sprays with eager hands, and thrusting between them a pale, eager, little face, which hardly felt the first hot thunder-drops that at the same moment fell upon it. Unfortunately she had not noticed that she was standing on the very brink of the pit, or that repeated rains had so hollowed out the sides from below that in some places only the tough roots of the bushes which girdled it sustained the thin stratum of soil which from above looked like solid ground. In others, indeed, these too had given way, and turf, shrubs, and creepers had fallen in, a huge

mass of green, luxuriant ruin to the bottom. It was this which happened now; and Sybil's light weight, resting on an overhanging piece just ready to fall, precipitated the calamity. She felt it give way beneath her, made a frantic clutch at a long blackberry bough, felt the sharp spines on it tear her hand and wrist, let go with a cry, and fell, all the more heavily for the rebound, crashing down into the hole beneath and bearing with her an avalanche of stones, gravel and weeds, uprooted by her fall.

* * * * *

The lightning was playing in swift, blue flashes over the heath, and the rain falling in a hot, hissing downpour, when, about ten o'clock that night, as old Isac Jowl was trudging homeward from some distant expedition on which he had got belated, he heard a voice, seemingly at his feet, crying faintly for 'help.'

For a moment some weird notion of fairies or goblins came into the plant-collector's mind, and with an uneasy glance over his shoulder at a milk-white spray of clematis which, waving through the darkness, looked like some dancing sprite, he was hurrying on the faster when the cry again sounded, this time with a distinctly human intonation.

'Help! Help! For God's sake come to me.'

'By the lud,' said Isac, stopping short in his walk and the surly chant with which he had been beguiling it, "'tis from t'owld pit yonder. What fool's gotten down into't now? Sarve 'em right to bide theer.'

But though he said it, he was not sufficiently hard-hearted to pass on; and in another moment was bending over the pit and peering into the black darkness below, as he called out,—

'Heh, there! Who's gotten ye below, an' who be you?'

A woman's voice, weak with pain and broken with sobs, answered him.

'For God's sake help me. I am Miss Dysart. Mrs Dysart of Hillbrow's daughter. I have fallen down and hurt my foot, so that I can't move. Pray—pray help me out.'

'Miss Dysart! One o' Widder Dysart's gals!' cried old Jowl, in blank amazement. 'An' down theer! Young 'ooman, whatever were ye up to? Some larks, I warrant me. Be ye aloan?'

There was no answer, however, but a low cry. In the effort to rise in speaking to him, poor Sybil had moved her foot;

and the pain that followed was so sharp that she fainted away under it.

When she next recovered she was in Jowl's cottage, lying on a wretched kind of flock-bed, infinitely filthy and repulsive to both eye and nose, with her injured foot bound up in rags wetted with some herb decoction, and her mouth smarting from the raw whisky which the plant-doctor had been trying to force down it. Her hat was gone, and her clothes soaked and draggled with the rain, which had been falling on her for the last two hours. There were scratches, too, on her face, and bruises on her hands and arms from her fall, and her whole body ached from head to foot; but all this was nothing to the horror of finding herself in such a place, alone at that hour of the night, with the ill-conditioned old man, of whom no one ever said any good; and almost before she had recovered full consciousness, she was imploring him with all the energy of which she was capable, to take her home, to take her back to her mother at once. She would pay him anything if he would only do so. 'Oh, mother, mother! if you could see me now! If I were only with you!'

Old Jowl looked her in the face and laughed. He did not mean to be brutal. He was even rather sorry for the poor girl, though his opinion of her at the best of times was not flattering; but the request struck him as too supremely ludicrous not to be laughed at.

'Tak' yee whoam at onst! Why, lass, d'ye think I'm gawn all the way t' Hillbrow wi' you on my back, an' a storm o' this like i' the face o' us? Happen ye're out o' your senses to ask it; and, by gom, I'd be more so to listen to ye. Noa, noa, young 'ooman, be thankful you're under a decent roof at all, an' wi' the benefit o' havin' yer foot doctored as none o' yer high-flyin' orspital skipjacks could doctor it ef they tried till Doomsday. Keep yerself still an' 'twill be well in twenty-four hours; an' pay me for the cure arterwards, ef you please. I'll not refuse my just dues; but don't go astin' impawsibles. Whoam ye shall go when 'tis daylight, an' I can get out my cart and moke to take you; but bide here ye mun till then, an' be thankful for it. Mebbé ye an' yer mother'll not be so ready to spite old Jowl in future. 'Tisn't only serving gals as gets inter trouble, they say, yoong missy; an' ye mun be glad this night that old Jowl's no gabbler, an' can know a thing or two w/out blabbin' o't.'

He stumped away into an inner room as he spoke; and miserable as Sybil felt, she dared urge him no more. There was an insolent meaning in the man's tone which cowed and humiliated her; and when he reappeared with sundry old feminine garments, and the suggestion that she should change her own soaked clothes for them, she only shrank away from him with a timid gesture of refusal, and covered her face with her hands to hide the tears which were raining down on it. Jowl laughed again.

'As ye like. As ye like,' he said, complacently. 'They're clean enow, turn up yer nose at 'em an' ye will; but I'll not force 'em on you. I'm just dead beat wi' toatin' of ye here, an' I'm gaun to sleep in 't other room; so ye can do the same by yerself. If ye're wakin' fust in the mornin', call me,' and he disappeared again. There was no use in saying anything more to him. He meant her no harm. If Sybil had been a little less terrified she might have seen that nothing was further from his intention than to take advantage of her unprotected presence there in any way; but Mrs Dysart had injured him, and her daughters had markedly avoided his house in their parish visitings. He was not likely to put himself out of his way to comfort one of them; and he did not.

How long that night seemed to the tender, delicately-nurtured girl lying there in the darkness, shivering with cold and fright, and trembling at every sound in the creaky, worm-eaten hovel, at the snores of the sleeper in the other room, the muttered thunder in the distance, and the drip drip of the rain through the rotten thatch.

'Mother, mother, mother!' was the one cry of her heart the whole time. 'Oh, mother! if you will only take me into your arms again after this, I will never go against you, or vex you any more—never, never.'

No, never any more. That promise was a true one, and to be kept for all eternity; yet it was not Sybil Dysart who had the keeping of it. God the All Powerful had taken that out of her hands.

There was no warning for the girl. When by bribes and entreaties she persuaded the grumbling Jowl to take her home as early as five o'clock on the following morning, it was natural to find the blinds still down all over the house, and to have her timid knock answered by Jenny rather than a servant—Jenny, dressed, and with a face so white, so wild and haggard, as to show at once that she, at any rate, had discovered her sister's absence the night before.

It was with a sob of something like relief that, after one terrified glance around expectant of another and more dreaded face, Sybil flung herself into the outstretched trembling arms which clasped her, and clung there whispering,—

‘Jenny, don’t look so. I couldn’t help it; indeed I couldn’t. I fell into a gravel pit and couldn’t get out. Oh, I have had such a night; I am so ill, so tired! Does mamma know? Ah, I see she does by your face. Jenny, is she very angry? Let me go to her. Let me tell her about it. It is all true, every word. The man there will vouch for it; and it was her fault. If she had not been so hard—’

But Jenny stopped her with a cry, a cry so full of sharp, unutterable pain, it seemed to rend the heart it broke from.

‘Hard! Oh, hush!’ she cried out wildly, pressing her hand upon her sister’s mouth. ‘Sybil, be silent! You don’t know—oh, my God, how can I tell you? You can’t go to her. You—Sybil, Sybil, we have no mother any more! When she found you were gone, the shock killed her. *She is dead!*’

CHAPTER V.

THE VACANT BERTH.

THIS Thursday was destined to be an eventful one, in the lives of some of the persons connected with my story. I have followed it with Mrs Dysart and Sybil. It is necessary to go back and see how it passed with Gareth Vane.

Having sent off the letter which worked such woe, he felt so virtuous that he slept rather later than usual; and, despite the heat, was able when he woke to write the required article for the ‘Scarifier’ with less trouble than he had expected, and to take it to the editor; an unwonted piece of energy, which was rewarded by that gentleman offering him some more work in the shape of a series of light ‘Society’ papers to run through the dead-season months.

“‘Manias of the Moment’ we think of calling them. Something bright and spicy, you know, and ranging from ‘eelskin garments’ to Irish outrages. Not too long. A column and a half, say, at utmost.’

‘Give them to me,’ said Gareth cheerfully; ‘I’ll do them, and spice liberally. Anything for bread and butter in these

sordid days ; and especially when the bread and butter has to do for more than one.'

'Nice talk that from you ! I thought you were a bachelor,' replied the editor significantly.

'So I am ; but I mayn't be one always,' retorted Gareth. 'Is that agreed, then ? Don't let me keep you from your work. This thunder in the air doesn't improve the brain power, anyhow. I feel mine used up already.'

He went away with an airy nod ; but the good mood was still on him ; for as a little later he sauntered in the direction of the Park, he almost made up his mind to stay at home that evening, and devote it to the 'eelskin garment' article in question ; and when a wretched-looking beggar-girl, with a baby in her arms, and a black eye, followed and begged of him with a piteous whine, he stopped and tossed her, not a curse, but a two-shilling piece.

'For luck !' he was saying to himself. 'Who knows if marrying my "lily maid" doesn't mean starving for both of us ; and that if we have a child she mayn't have to turn out into the streets some day to beg bread for it ? I don't think I should come to banging her about though, even then, as that poor Joan's "Darby" seems to be in the habit of doing. Fancy hurting Sybil ! Why, I believe if you held up a finger at her she'd melt. Well, well, it's something to be loved by such a lovely little saint ; and if the gods are kind, we'll manage to rub on somehow, even without Helen's countenance—'

'Gareth Vane ! How do you do ?'

He was midway down the Row, and the voice came to him from a carriage which was drawn up quite close to the sidewalk.

Lifting his eyes quickly, they met those of Mrs Beverley and of a very pretty woman in an entire costume by Worth, of pale blue and silver brocade. Both ladies were smiling towards him, and in common civility he was compelled to take off his hat and come to the side of the barouche ; but for once in his life, at any rate, it was not done willingly. It seemed to him at that moment as if there was a fate against 'goodness.' Only last night he had resolved to keep out of Belle Beverley's way, and in pursuance of that resolution had fixed the rendezvous with his betrothed for Friday, so that he might avoid dining with the too fascinating widow on that day by the excuse of a summons from town. But his efforts appeared to be useless, for here was Belle herself gazing into his face, and holding out

to him her sixteen-button gloved hands to be shaken ; and how was he to avoid them or her either ? After all, she was his—cousin, nothing more ; and yesterday's words were never those of to-day.

‘How do you do ? Fancy, two such brilliant ladies deigning to see me before I saw them !’ he said, gallantly.

Mrs Beverley laughed.

‘And just when we were wanting you too ! Did you think I spoke to you just now, when I said your name ? I did not. I had just told Cora here, “I know a man who will do, and there he is.” Cora said, “Who ?” and I answered, “Gareth Vane.”’

‘I am growing more *vain* than ever !’ said Gareth. ‘What am I to do, Mrs Vanderbilt ?’ turning towards the blue-and-silver lady. ‘I’m not good at *doing* anything that I know of, except, of course, my duty.’

‘Then your duty’s to say Yes, right away, at present,’ said Mrs Vanderbilt. ‘Wait though. How many engagements have you concluded for the rest of the season ?’

‘One,’ said Gareth concisely ; and thinking of Sybil.

‘That’s lovely ; because I guess you’ll break it.’

‘Shall I ? If Mrs Vanderbilt didn’t say that, I should answer, “Problematical !”’

‘Not if we make you an engagement to last two months. One for only a day can always give way to that.’

‘Pardon me, mine is for every day, and — more beyond. Mistress Beverley, you are looking dreadfully impatient. What do you want me for ? I can’t do it ; but you may as well tell me, so that I may feel properly disappointed.’

‘But you mustn’t be disappointed ; and you can—you *must* do it,’ cried Belle eagerly. ‘Gareth, we are going to Norway for a yachting cruise—Colonel and Mrs Vanderbilt and I. We’ve taken Lord Lampden’s yacht for the season ; and we mean to get out of all this dirty, dusty, smothering London for two months at least, and have what Cora calls a good time.’

‘It’ll be real lovely,’ said the American lady. ‘Say, Mr Vane, you’ll come, of course. You’re bound to enjoy yourself ; and you won’t have anything to do but look after your cousin.’

‘And she will give you no trouble,’ put in Belle softly. ‘Gareth, think of the fjords !’

‘If you can think of anything but Mrs Beverley, when she is in presence,’ said another voice, ‘I couldn’t ;’ and turning his head Gareth saw Matt Jacobson close at his shoulder. The

latter, however, only answered his surprised look with a tap on the shoulder. His black prominent eyes were fixed admiringly—too admiringly, Gareth thought—on the widow.

‘Do tell, if it isn’t Mr Jacobson!’ said Mrs Vanderbilt. ‘Why, the colonel told me that you were never to be got of an afternoon; that you lived down country?’

‘So I do,’ responded Mr Jacobson, ‘when I’m not in town; but it occurred to me that if I braved my wife’s displeasure, and stayed up to-day, I might be rewarded by a glimpse of two bright planets among the galaxy of Hyde Park stars. Was I very wrong, Mrs Beverley?’

Belle was not attending to him. She had turned to Gareth, and said, in a lower tone,—

‘It’s so fortunate we met you. This was all got up last night, and we start next week. Lord Lampden was going himself, and the yacht was all fitted up and manned when something occurred to prevent him leaving England—the fact is, *someone*, I believe, wouldn’t go with him!—so Colonel Van and I jumped at the opportunity to rent it. He has asked that little Ella Peel, the heiress, whom Cora’s brother is so smitten with—I fancy he’s rather sweet upon her himself—to go with us; and of course young Washington P— into the bargain. I am to ask two friends on my side; and as Cora is mad about music, she has coaxed me to invite Trembolini for one. She doesn’t know him herself; but they sang together at my house once, and their voices did go ravishingly. The only drawback is that he regards her as a musical-box, and *me*—as a woman; but with you there— Gar, do you remember the post you filled on our happy Nile voyage in the winter of 187—? I don’t think you disliked it then?’

‘Neither then nor now,’ said Gareth, flushing slightly as he remembered that the post in question had been one which had excited no little jealousy among others in the party ‘poor Tom’ not excluded. ‘My dear coz, how could I be anything but charmed at such a prospect? I only wish—’

‘That you were free to profit by it,’ put in Mr Jacobson, who was affronted at not being more noticed by the widow, and desirous to let that ‘woman-conquering Adonis’ feel the curb-rein. ‘Don’t try to tempt him, Mrs Beverley. You know the old saw, “All other things must needs give place if there’s a female in the case,” and there’s a confoundedly pretty one now, isn’t there, Vane? What would our little Surrey damsel (who, by the way, seems to have cut the wife since your engagement)

say to the idea of your going off on the loose this way? I'm surprised even to see you up in town. When is it to come off?

'When is what to come off? My dear Jacobson, you're like Jupiter, never open your mouth but a female drops out of it, armed *cap-a-pie*,' said Gareth sharply.

Of all things he had wished, though he scarce knew why, not to mention his engagement to Belle till matters were more advanced.

Matt Jacobson laughed.

'What? Why, the wedding, of course. Your cousin looks surprised, I see. Have I told a secret? Very sorry, I'm sure; but, 'pon my word, I thought among relations—'

'You might venture on a jest without fearing to be taken in earnest,' put in Belle Beverley. Her magnificent figure was drawn up to its full height; but Gareth saw, with a thrill at his own pulses which annoyed him, that the hand which rested near his on the side of the carriage trembled like a leaf; while even her lips had paled. 'You were right, Mr Jacobson. Gareth Vane and I are too near relations and too old friends for me to be likely to believe that he would let the news of his engagement—if there were such a thing—reach me through a mere acquaintance. Don't be afraid, Gareth. *Loyal quand même* was always our motto, wasn't it? And now, good afternoon, gentlemen. If Cora doesn't mind, we'll drive on. It's too hot for sitting still in this glare. Till to-morrow, Gar.'

They were off before Gareth could answer, if he had wished to do so, and the two men were left looking at one another.

'So,' said Mr Jacobson sulkily, 'that's the way the wind blows, does it? A fine fellow you are, Vane, with two strings to your bow, and such strings forsooth! Egad! though, I know which I'd choose if I were free. That woman is superb. What a lucky dog you are!'

'Glad you think so,' said Gareth, with a little extra languor of manner because of the vexation he was feeling. 'My cousin ought to be obliged to you. Good-bye. Remember me to Mrs Jacobson. I've got an engagement.'

'So I had thought!' retorted Mr Jacobson with a sneer. 'Sits pretty easy on you, though. Take care it doesn't on other folks as well. I suppose you know that your rival is back at Chadleigh End; and that there's another French proverb (you and Mrs Beverley seem fond of them) which says: *On revient toujours à ses premières amours.* Ta, ta.'

Gareth went home that afternoon feeling thoroughly put out.

For one cause the thunder in the air had given him a headache ; and then two or three things seemed to have conspired to go wrong with him.

That trip to Norway. Could anything have seemed more charming to his pleasure-loving soul—hateful, too, as London at the present moment undoubtedly was ?

Then the company. Just what he would have chosen.

The colonel, a dry, shrewd American, full of quaint jests and humorous anecdotes ; his wife, clever, pretty, and with a voice like a nightingale ; Ella Peel, the very ideal of a jolly girl, and capable of pulling an oar, taking a second in a glee, or tramping a dozen miles over rock and heath with you with equal ease ; Mrs Vanderbilt's brother, Washington P. Jeffcote, a fellow-journalist, mild, well-mannered, and with an inexhaustible supply of the best cigars to be smoked anywhere in England or 'Amurrica ; Trembolini, the famous baritone, with a voice of thunder and heart of honey, but whose amatory passions might easily be kept in order if he were there ; Belle— Pshaw ! where was the good of thinking of it if he couldn't go ? And how could he think of such a thing now that he was fettered by an engagement ? He couldn't have afforded it anyhow ; but under other circumstances Helen might have lent him the money. Now—deuce take it all ! And why did people tantalise him by suggesting things that were out of his reach ? Jacobson too ! It was just like that chattering, full-lipped idiot to go and blurt out about Sybil to Belle. 'I believe the scoundrel's in love with her himself. By Jove ! how she put him down, though ! I never thought she would have taken it in that way. It was enough to make one fancy— *He* thought that too ; and so does Helen. But no, there's nothing in it really. We've both outlived that nonsense long enough ago ; and in the Nile days it was she who was the cool one and I the maniac—ay, mad enough to have taken the leap then and there, as I believe Tom, poor fellow ! knew. How he used to stick to her side whenever we landed to inspect the ruins ; and now she wants me to take the same position. I wish I had told her more positively it was impossible ; but she went off in such a hurry she gave me no time even to excuse myself from the dinner to-morrow, as I had intended. I must write instead ; but I may as well wait till I get Sybil's letter. There's sure to be one—women always write whether there's any occasion or not—and, by heaven ! if she makes any absurd difficulties, or says she can't come, I—well, it will be her own :

fault ; but I believe I'd go to Norway after all. Ha ! there's the thunder at last.'

It was the first distant muttering significant of the coming storm ; but before ten minutes were over the rain was pattering down in huge hot drops upon the dusty pavement ; and all night long it beat and fretted at the window-pane to an accompaniment of heavy rolling thunder-claps and rapid flashes of lightning, which once brought his landlady to his door to ask if he would mind putting the fire-irons under the hearthrug, and twice or thrice disturbed him in his slumbers. They might have done so altogether had he guessed that all through the early part of the night, Sybil—delicate, tenderly-reared Sybil—was lying on a heap of wet gravel in the old pit on Chadleigh Heath, exposed to all the fury of the storm. But no such vision ever crossed his mind ; as how, indeed, should it ? The mistake caused by using that pre-dated letter which made 'the day after to-morrow' read to Sybil for *Thursday*, instead of the *Friday* which was intended—a mistake which the reader must have seen for himself from the beginning—never even crossed Gareth's brain for one fleeting moment. It was a type of his habitual thoughtlessness, both that he should have done so careless a thing, and that, having done it, he should have failed to cast a thought to its consequences : a type, too, of the way in which he had more than once before muddled his own affairs, and shipwrecked those of others.

Of course there was no letter in the morning ; and though Mr Vane had sneered at the fondness of women for writing without any necessity, and had deprecated beforehand the idea of scruples or demurs, the silence rather irritated him. Of course it meant that she would be there. In fact, his own letter had as good as said, 'Don't answer, but come ;' but he had not expected it to be obeyed so literally. It was unlike his idea of Sybil's loving feminine effusiveness, and he almost wondered if the interview would be less tender to correspond. Surely that old lover of hers, with his confounded parson's cunning, had not contrived— Bah ! that was all Jacobson's nonsense ; and, anyhow, what he had got to do was to go and make his excuses to Belle beforehand. Perhaps he had better call on her for that purpose. It would be more civil than writing, and the latter might look as if he were afraid of an interview and make her despise him.

He went there accordingly, choosing an hour in the morning when he half hoped he might find her out ; and be able to leave

a pencilled line of apology ; but he was disappointed. Not only was Belle herself within, and at home to him, but the whole house seemed alive and big with preparations for departure.

Mrs Vanderbilt, more gorgeously attired (after the manner of American women) at twelve o'clock A.M. than English ones are wont to be for an afternoon *réte*, was looking out places of interest in Murray's Norway ; a Gladstone bag, and a huge leather-covered dress-basket, fresh from the trunkmakers, were standing in the hall ; and Belle herself, in a morning robe of salmon-coloured cashmere, with wide loose sleeves and rufflings of lace and ribbon all down the front, was just scrawling a telegram to Lord Lampden, the page waiting at her elbow, when Gareth's entrance caused her to start up and fling aside the pen with a frank exclamation of joy.

He was vexed with himself to feel how it moved him to see the eager brightness die out of her face when she learnt the purport of his visit.

'Not coming this evening ? I had hoped you only came now to settle about our journey. You are going with us on that. We can't do without you ; and I have written—'

'My dear Belle, I wish with all my heart that I could, but it's out of the question.'

'Out of the question to take your usual summer's outing, and do me a favour in taking it ! Why, you said yourself you had made no other plans ; and I know you have wished to go to Norway. What is the matter ? Have I offended you ? Or is— Was that man right ? Is there some woman in the way ?'

She had drawn him out of the room where her friend was seated into the smaller one within, and Gareth could see the lips which put the question tremble as her hands had done yesterday ; only now there was a red flame in either cheek. His own wore their normal colour, yet he had not courage to tell her the truth. Besides, there was the bare possibility that Sybil might disappoint him, and put fresh difficulties in the way, and he remembered that if she did so he would count himself free to go where he listed. It was this thought which eased his conscience to answer,—

'There is no woman in the case ; and, my dear Belle, you're only too good to ask me. Jacobson is an impertinent—'

'I don't like him,' she interrupted. 'Gareth, why did you ever bring him here ? He has been coming, and coming incessantly this summer. Why do you send him ?'

'I send him ! I never even knew of it.'

‘ Yet you have been continually at his place or in the neighbourhood ; and he even had the impertinence to hint to me that he was making a cat’s-paw of some country coquette to keep you away so that he might fill your place here. My dear Gar, you know how I want you to be happy ; but don’t—for your own sake—don’t let a man like that dupe you.’

There was a flush now on Gareth’s face, an angry one ; but his smile was only scornful.

‘ Dupe me ! No fear of that ; though I own your exposition of the Israelite’s little game is both new and edifying to me. He made a mistake, though, seeing that I have no place to fill, except that of one among a thousand admirers of the beautiful Mrs B. Snub him, belle cousine, as you’ve often snubbed me, and—get rid of him.’

‘ When did I snub you, except in fun ? But he is not so easily got rid of, and if I try, it puts Cora out. She has taken a fancy to him. She actually wants—Gareth, it is true—that I should ask him to come with us if you fail me.’

‘ But he has a wife. Does Mrs Vanderbilt know that ?’

‘ Wives’ fetters sit easily on some men. He came on to Cora’s after the drive yesterday, and fished for an invitation till, if there had been the tiniest vacant berth, she would have given it him then. Gareth, you will not let him have the chance of one ?’

‘ I should be only too happy to hinder it ; but, honour bright, I don’t think I can.’

‘ You don’t *think* ! Then you are not sure ?’

‘ I am almost sure. There is just a faint chance that this business which prevents my dining with you to-night might leave me at liberty, but—’

‘ And when will this business be over ?’

‘ Scarcely before ten o’clock.’

‘ Then come to me at ten, and tell me. Promise that, at least. How long is it since I asked you a favour ? Time was when you would have begged this of me.’

‘ I have grown less presumptuous with age, which makes your offer more generous. If I’m fortunate enough to be able to claim the vacant berth, I will certainly come and do so, and to-night, since you let me.’

And then he made his escape. As he walked down the muddy, steaming streets, in which the close air, still heavy with latent thunder, seemed to bring forth every dormant noisome London smell, the thought of that white-winged yacht breasting

the pure salt breezes of the Northern sea came across him like a breath of paradise. Yet the very pang of envy it awakened made him more satisfied with himself. For once in his life he felt as if he had rivalled St Anthony. The temptation had taken a more alluring form than he had thought of.

He little dreamt what reward his virtue was to meet when, on going to his rooms that evening to change his coat for the railway journey, he found two notes waiting for him.

One was from Matt Jacobson, and as follows :—

‘**MY DEAR VANE**,—I’m afraid I made a stupid blunder yesterday, and vexed both you and a certain fair lady who shall be nameless ; but you have not looked us up for some time, and the Dysart young lady (ungrateful puss !) has fairly cut my wife, so I didn’t know there had been a split between you ; though I own your departure and the parson’s return might have suggested it. When I got home last night, however, I found my little Vicky had returned from her morning walk full of a most touching interview she and her nurse had witnessed between pretty Miss Sybil and her old lover. There were pocket-handkerchiefs out, hands clasped in hands, and heads together (all in the open air !) ; from which I take it for granted that a reconciliation was going on, and that you have vacated the field. The young lady’s affections seem easily transferable ; or was it *you* who were fickle ? At any rate, you appear to have consoled yourself as easily and in more royal kind. I congratulate you.—
In haste, yours,

MATT JACOBSON.’

The other was from Dr Hamilton.

‘**MY DEAR GARETH**,—In a note to your sister to-day, Mrs Beverley mentions that she and a party of friends are going to Norway for their summer holiday, and want you to join them ; but that you seem to find some difficulty in doing so. It has occurred to us that the difficulty is probably a pecuniary one ; and, therefore, I write this to say that if fifty pounds would be of any use to you, you can have a cheque for the same by sending for it. Don’t make a fuss of gratitude over this. I’m a plain man, and I tell you frankly that I shouldn’t join in offering you money for a mere pleasure-trip if I didn’t think you were better in any place than London just now. The fact is, you have got into a bad set of late, Gar, and have wasted your time and money on play and follies which can only end in your ruin, and the thought of which has seriously grieved your sister. Use this voyage to break free from friends and habits which are daily

dragging you lower, and Helen and I will count the cash well spent. If you also use it in thinking more seriously over an engagement in which I am sorry to hear you have entangled yourself, I, as your friend, shall be still better pleased. A brother-in-law has no right to interfere in such matters, and I claim none; but I happen to know something of the person in question and her family; and I tell you emphatically that such a marriage would not be for your honour, and that the young woman (who has already jilted a better man than yourself) could never be received by my wife in the event of her becoming yours. This is frank speaking, but meant in kindness, and you will take it kindly, I know. After all, I say nothing more but—Don't be hasty! *Think!*—
Your affectionate brother, JOHN HAMILTON.'

It was between three and four hours after reading this that Gareth Vane rang at the bell of Mrs Beverely's house and was admitted. He was very pale, and there was a sharp furrow between his brows, and his blue eyes were unusually bright; but from the accurately-brushed waves of his glossy hair to the diamonds in his shirt-front, and the points of his patent-leather shoes, there was no iota which betrayed one wandering thought or careless finger-touch in the elegant elaborateness of his usual appearance. Yet he had been down to Chadleigh Heath, had waited half-an-hour for the up train without seeing a soul who knew him; and had returned to London, and even written a brief note, before he changed his dress and set out for Kensington.

Sybil had not appeared, and he had hardly expected her to do so. Indeed, he never thought of doubting Matt Jacobson's story. If the latter had lured him on in his love affair with Miss Dysart, it was certainly not his interest to help by a syllable in breaking it off; and now he had evidently written believing what he said, and sore and mortified in the belief. John Hamilton, too, was an honourable man, one to whom Gareth looked up, and who he knew would not speak on such a matter without reason. Had not that very reminder, indeed, 'she has jilted a better man than you already,' been rankling in his own mind, even under the sweetness of Sybil's kisses, and still more through the difficulties and restrictions which she had imposed on him? No; she was a weak, soft creature, facile to win and kiss, and more facile to lose and give the kisses to another. The first sight of her old lover returned had probably re-awakened her tender feelings for him; and she had shrunk from meeting

Gareth without even writing to make excuse for doing so. Perhaps the excuses would come later. If so, too late for him. He wished the parson joy, and for his own part took his freedom back most gladly.

As Belle Beverely saw him coming to meet her across the room, she looked in his eyes and read, through all the languor and nonchalance of his bearing, what was the answer he had brought her. Yet there was a meaning in his tone and in the pressure of his hand which set her erring, wayward heart fluttering as though she were a girl, as he said, 'I have kept my promise, you see, and come back to you. Is that berth still vacant, Belle? If so, please put me down for it. I am yours now until you dismiss me.'

Book V.

CHAPTER I.

'WHOM SYBIL CHOOSES I WILL CHOOSE.'

'BUT, Jenny, my dear, I can't bear to think of it,' said Mrs Ashleigh. 'So far away! And how do you know that this person will make you comfortable? Lord Dysart! Pshaw! What is Lord Dysart's caring for you compared with ours? And that is it; you make me feel as if we had been unkind—as if we did not share in your grief. Indeed, my dear, you wrong us. You forget how many years I and your poor mother had been dear friends. I was always very fond of her, and I am very fond of *you* now, Jenny child.'

There was a heap of boxes and packages in the little hall at Hillbrow, and Mrs Ashleigh—cool, sarcastic, stately Mrs Ashleigh—was seated on one of the former crying as unrestrainedly as any milkmaid, while she held one of Jenny's hands clasped in hers.

All round there were signs of disturbance and moving—pictures taken down and laid on sofas, pots of flowers tied up in bits of sacking, books and desks heaped together on the floor, straw and litter everywhere; and Jenny, with the paleness

of her face and hands gleaming whitely from the contrast to her straight black gown, looking like some tall pale lily that an untimely frost has nipped.

'Thank you,' she said, gently, but with a slight coldness, as recognising the emphasis on that 'you' which separated her from Sybil. 'I know you are very kind, but you forget Lord Dysart is our relation—our only relation now. We were obliged to send for him, and he has arranged everything for us. I am glad it is not out of Surrey. It would have been hard to go right away.'

'Right away!' echoed Mrs Ashleigh; 'why, my dear, do you know how far Esher is from Dilworth? Twelve miles at least, and you can't go by rail except by changing at Clapham. Anything might happen before one could get to you.'

'I do not think there is anything to happen to us now,' said Jenny, with so sad a smile that Mrs Ashleigh could have welcomed the sight of tears instead. 'We had nothing but our mother and our home before, and we have lost both. So long as we are together we have nothing more to lose; and it was very good of Lord Dysart to pay for a home for us with his old housekeeper, for you know we have now nothing of our own except Sybil's hundred a-year, and we could not both live on that.'

'I knew your poor mother's income died with her, but I have always understood—she told me, indeed—that she had insured her life for two thousand pounds on purpose—'

'So she did; but I suppose she had a good deal to think of this year and forgot it, or perhaps she was short of money; anyhow, it seems there has been no premium paid for the last eighteen months, and so it has fallen through. Poor mother! it was a comfort she was not able to remember at the last. She was always so anxious for us. It is better she should not have known.'

'Better for her,' said Mrs Ashleigh, still gently stroking the cold slim hand she held. 'Yet it seems strange, with that intense anxiety for you, that she should have forgotten, and I don't like to think of your being left so destitute, my poor Jenny. It is only right of Lord Dysart to be kind, of course; but if he had not been—'

'If he had not been, we could have done without him,' said Jenny, trying to smile more bravely; 'we have been well taught. I should have got a place as governess—daily governess, so as not to leave poor Sybil too much alone while she is ailing, or perhaps—'

'You should have done nothing of the sort,' Mrs Ashleigh interrupted warmly. 'Child, do you want to make me angry? You should have come to me and taken care of me till someone else ran away with you. Oh yes; you needn't look at me. Margaret and I talked it over directly we heard how it was with you. It seemed likely to both of us that Lord Dysart or some of your—your sister's new connections, would naturally ask her to stay with them, and so we decided to put in our claim to you and bring you home to Dilworth for as long as you would stay. You would not dislike to be with your old friends, would you, my dear? Indeed, we would have tried to make you happy.'

'You are very good,' said Jenny, with a trembling voice; though even then no tears came to her eyes, grown pitiful with repression of such luxury. 'But I could not be happy away from Sybil while she wants me. We have only one another now; and she is not going to—to anyone. She would not, even if she were well enough. We mean to keep together.'

'I am sorry she has been so ill,' said Mrs Ashleigh, rather stiffly. Kind woman, and Christian as she was, it was not in human nature for her to be ready to forgive and take to her arms the girl who had so cruelly jilted her son, and especially a girl about whom people were saying such terrible things at present. Yet it was an impulse of true motherliness which, as the thought of these things rose before her mind, caused her to add with some embarrassment, 'I am sorry for it, both because it is an additional trouble when you must both need all your strength, and because it lends a colour to the— My dear Jenny, I hardly like to speak about such matters to you, and yet, if they cannot be disproved, they will greatly injure—not you! None could be so unjust as to connect you with your sister in these unpleasant scandals—but Sybil herself, and far more than—'

'Scandals! What scandals?' cried Jenny. Her face had flushed like a rose, and she plucked away her hand as though it had been stung. 'I do not understand you. People are unjust enough here, but there is no injustice in connecting me with my sister in any and every way. Why should they not? I wish them to do so.'

'My dear, you are hasty,' answered Mrs Ashleigh. 'Do you think I would run the risk of offending you if I could help it, or that it is any pleasure to me to mention Sybil's name? I did so because, grievously as she has disappointed me, she is

still a young girl, and my dear dead friend's daughter. These reports that are being spread about her have pained us all greatly, and I should have been glad to be able to contradict them. But if you are angry with me—'

'Please do not mind my being angry,' cried Jenny passionately. Her mood had changed, and she was as crimsoned and panting now as she had been pale and still before. 'Tell me what they say, these people who do not even know how to respect my dear, gentle, innocent sister in her sorrow. It will not be difficult to contradict it, at any rate. Sybil never did anything to be ashamed of in her life, and if Lion could forgive that, as he told me himself he had done, no one else need say anything about it.'

'This has nothing to do with Lion,' said Mrs Ashleigh gently. 'It—my dear, I would far rather not tell you. You are too young and pure to hear of such matters; but, on the other hand, if they should be untrue, she ought to know, and they will come better from me than the rector. Jenny dear, they say Sybil caused her mother's death, that she ran away with Mr Vane the evening before it happened; but when she found out he did—did not mean to marry her, she escaped next morning and came home, and that it was the shock of seeing her daughter's return under such circumstances which killed—My child, it is terrible to have to repeat such things, but—'

'But oh! it is more terrible to invent them,' cried Jenny. She was trembling with indignant horror, her head thrown back, her small, pure face flashing with scornful disgust. 'Mrs Ashleigh, you don't believe—you, who knew my mother, who know Sybil—our Sybil—you would never believe that she had so lowered herself, run away, deceived—oh! you could not credit anything so infamously false.'

'It is false, then? All of it?' Mrs Ashleigh put in, with real gladness. At that moment she actually thought her young outspoken favourite more beautiful than her sister, and felt that for Jenny's sake it might be possible to forgive Sybil. 'My dear, I am so pleased. It seemed a most horrible story to me; and now that I can deny it— But you must give me full authority to do so. It is all sheer invention, Sybil's leaving her home and Mr Vane's conduct, and the shock to your poor dear mother, all mere vulgar falsehood? How glad I am I told you of it!'

She had risen, and was looking at her young friend with bright, inquiring eyes, one hand raised to stroke the fair smooth head

with a comforting touch ; but to her surprise Jenny shrank, shrank unmistakably, from eye and touch, and the flush which a moment before had kindled her face with such unwonted beauty, died suddenly out of it, leaving it ghastly pale.

She knew the whole story, all that had happened. Sybil had told it frankly to her, clinging to her neck in the first agony of her sorrow, and therefore she knew that, save for that one almost pardonable act of disobedience, her sister was innocent of all wrong and shame in the matter ; but she had sense enough to know too, that even if that story were told to the outer world few would believe it—scarcely even the kind-hearted woman with the cynical smile, whose word in the neighbourhood was all-powerful to prove or disprove an accusation ; nay, that their own mother must have lost faith in her child's honour and maidenliness, and died in the shock of such disbelief ; and she could not—no, not to save her own soul—crush her poor bruised darling still lower by telling the feeble, halting, unconfirmed story as it stood. Besides, had she the right to tell it—to betray Sybil's secret and brand the man she loved with cruelty and selfishness, which would go far to make others believe him guilty of worse things yet ? Would her sister forgive her if she did, and would anything recompense her for an estrangement between them ? How much easier to tell one little falsehood—to say, 'Yes, it is all false. Sybil had gone out on an errand for my mother ; ' or 'There was no need for her to run away. My mother had forgiven her, and consented to the marriage.' Mrs Ashleigh would believe her, and— But even as the insidious thought shaped itself into words and grew in her mind, Jenny's keen integrity met and cast it from her with a shiver as though she had felt the prick of some poisoned javelin.

'Falsehood ? Yes, it is falsehood,' she said, lifting her white face and looking full at the rector's wife with great, piteous, defiant eyes, 'Sybil did go out that evening, but it was not to run away. I cannot tell you what she went for. That has nothing to do with it, and it was not her fault that she did not come back when she intended. She had an accident, and hurt her foot. She— Mrs Ashleigh, if you look in that way it is no use my saying anything ; but it is true all the same. Sybil never saw Mr Vane. She told me so. Surely, surely, you believe her ?'

'My dear, I wish I could,' said Mrs Ashleigh gravely. 'But you must own the look— Hush ! I am saying nothing to make you angry. I am very, very sorry for you.'

But Jenny could not be content.

‘Sorry!’ she cried, vehemently. ‘What does that matter? Do you not believe her?’

Mrs Ashleigh looked at her.

‘Did your mother believe?’ she asked, solemnly; and then, as the poor tortured child shrank back, hiding her face in her hands: ‘I believe in *you*,’ she added, very kindly, ‘and I pity, I most sincerely pity, Sybil. If she has erred, she has been most heavily punished, and, though she and I can scarcely be friends, I will do all in my power to help and shield her. Jenny, my poor child, don’t sob so. I am not in the least offended with you; and when you have got settled in your new home, you must come and stay.’

But Jenny only shook her head, and drew herself away from the kind arm and motherly bosom which would have sheltered her. It would have been very sweet that shelter, very sweet to have rested her aching head there, and wept away some of the mother-want which was pressing on her soul; but there was no room there for Sybil—and could she take any good which her sister might not share?

‘No, no,’ she said, brokenly; ‘you mean to be kind and generous, but I cannot go to you, and you must not come to us. It is well that we are going away. We could not stay in a place where even the people who have known us all our lives can say what you have said, and believe what you believe; and I can have no friends but my sister’s. Mrs Ashleigh, please forgive me; but it is better so. You cannot separate Sybil and me. If she has disappointed you, if you think badly of her, think as badly of me; for I love her so much that where she goes I will go, and whom she chooses I will choose. Only when you are asked for the truth about her, tell the story as I tell it you—that is all I ask of you. By to-morrow we shall be gone away, and there will be no one else to do it.’

It was quite true. The litter and disorder all about were signs of the packing even then going on; and when Mrs Ashleigh had driven away, going still sorrowfully incredulous, and with a certain stately constraint about her farewell which poor Jenny knew to be the effect of her own impetuous renunciation, it was an additional pain to the girl that there was not a corner in their once quiet and peaceful home in which she could hide herself to weep undisturbed; save, indeed, her sister’s sick-room, where she had already resolved it would be sin and selfishness to show anything but a calm and hopeful face.

For poor Sybil was suffering grievously both in mind and body. It was a fortnight to-day since her mother's death, eight days since the funeral, and yet she had never seen the dead face, which had looked its last upon her empty room, before it was hid under the coffin-lid ; or had left the chamber to which Jenny had almost carried her when, overwhelmed by the awful tidings so suddenly broken to her, she had sunk insensible at her sister's feet. Alas ! she only woke from that swoon to pain and suffering so intense that even the unconsciousness of death would have seemed merciful in exchange.

That night passed under the pouring rain, and in clothes wet to the skin, had brought on a severe attack of inflammation of the lungs ; and even now, though the worst part of the illness was over, and she was so far recovered as to leave her bed and lie on the sofa for the greater part of the day, there remained behind a constant hacking cough, and a prostration and languor against which medicines seemed to have no effect.

'I am not sure that change of air and scene won't do her more good than anything, once she is able to be moved,' the doctor told Jenny consolingly. 'This weakness is as much from the shock to the nerves as the illness ;' and Jenny had hoped that even the sad excitement of their preparations for departure might rouse her sister a little ; but Sybil hardly seemed to heed or pay attention to them ; and even now, when the last day had come, she lay still and motionless on her couch with her face crushed down in the pillows as if to hide it from the light, and never speaking or moving save when she was asked how she would like this thing or that, when her answer was always,—

'Ask Miss Jenny, please. She will tell you. I had rather she settled it.'

Everything fell on Jenny in these days—packing arrangements, business letters, dismissals of servants, all the sorrowful work, the many worries and anxieties, great and small, of breaking up the home where they had lived since childhood, and entering on their new one ; and sometimes she wondered at herself, so young and inexperienced as she was, for being able to do it at all, and decided that she could never have succeeded but for Lionel's help —Lion, who though he never came to the house, was always at her beck and call, and ready to serve them in every way, from driving bargains with auctioneers and house-agents, and seeing Lord Dysart's lawyer, to buying in little trifles which Jenny did not think it right to keep, but from which he knew both girls

would hate to part, and even to going over to Esher to visit Mrs Matherson, the widow with whom they were to board, and make sure that everything had been arranged comfortably for their reception.

'We've been brother and sister so long, Jenny dear, you mustn't disown me just when you want a brother most, and when the biggest comfort I have left is to be of use to you,' he said, with an unwonted moisture in his honest eyes; and Jenny accepted his good offices as simply as they were given. She knew he did it all for Sybil's sake, and not hers. He believed in Sybil.

Lord Dysart, too, had been kind in his way. As an elderly widower of somewhat gay proclivities, he could hardly have taken the girls to live with him even if he had wished it, and, besides, he was just starting for the German baths; but in the autumn, when his sister Lady Willoughby came to pay him her annual visit, the girls must both come too; and very likely Lady Willoughby would take a fancy to one of them, and bring her up to London to be introduced, and that sort of thing. Lady Willoughby liked chaperoning a pretty girl; and there was no denying that Sybil was a deucedly pretty little thing when well. Pity that long thin Jenny didn't take after her, and put on a little flesh and blood. In the meantime, however, and since they wanted to be quiet, they had better board with an old housekeeper of his, a very good sort of body, who would wait on and look after them at the same time. She was pensioned off, and lived rent-free in a cottage belonging to the earl near Esher Common; but she sometimes added to her income by taking boarders, and he knew she would be delighted to have the Miss Dysarts. As for their dress and washing, and those matters, they must pay for them out of the proceeds of the sale and the hundred pounds a-year his wife had left Sybil. It was a pity there was no more, and that their mother should have thrown all that insurance money away as she had done; but that was always the way with women, and clever women especially, who would manage their own affairs instead of employing an agent. The girls might be glad they had anything, and that Mrs Matherson was there to take care of them.

Poor Jenny did not feel very glad when, on the morning of their last day at home, she went all over the house, from room to room, saying a final good-bye to each through tears which so blinded her she could scarcely see the familiar corners, whose memories she would fain have carried away with her; kneeling

beside her mother's bed, and pressing her lips to the pillow where that loved head had rested ; to the little bench in the arbour, where long ago she used to sit while the children romped among the rose-walks in the garden ; and the sofa in the drawing-room where she always rested of an evening while Sybil sang to her the simple ballads she loved, and Lion and Jenny, half-hidden behind a heap of books at a distant table, fought out some argument in subdued voices so as not to disturb the music.

Sybil did not accompany her in this farewell pilgrimage ; she was far too weak for such a trial ; and when a few hours later the two girls descended the stairs to the carriage which was waiting for them, the elder hanging heavily on her sister's arm, and Jenny, holding her closely, whispered, 'Dear, wouldn't you like to take one look at mother's room before we go ? It is just as it always was still. I even filled the flower-vases today so as to leave them as she liked it'—Sybil only shivered from head to foot, and clung closer to her sister, murmuring, 'Oh no, no ! I could not bear it.'

Yet, as they drove away from the house, she leant suddenly forward for one long, yearning, wistful look at the old home she was leaving, and then dropped back again, and hid her face with a low sob on Jenny's bosom, while the younger girl clasped her tightly with such fast-falling tears that it was not for two or three minutes that she found out that the effort had been too much for her sister's strength. She had fainted again.

Not once since that first agitated confession, poured out when she was half delirious with pain and fever, had Sybil uttered Gareth Vane's name, or expressed a wish to see him. A letter addressed to her in his handwriting had arrived the second day after Mrs Dysart's death, but she was then too ill even to be told of it ; and when the crisis was turned, and she was able to ask, very low and falteringly, if anything had come for her, Jenny went at once for the note (it was too thin to be anything more) and put it in her sister's hand, going away without even glancing at her face, lest she should see a gladness there, which, even if pardonable, would have grated on her at that moment. She was very sorry afterwards ; for as she came upstairs an hour later she met a maid, who was hurrying to tell her that she had just found poor Miss Sybil in a dead faint ; and though the latter made no allusion to the letter even after she had recovered, Jenny could not think it had brought her either comfort or gladness. Indeed, when the doctor came

next day, he spoke more gravely than he had yet done of her condition, and asked angrily what she had been doing to account for the utter prostration of mind and body in which he found her. Alas ! it was that which was still baffling him, and which, amid all the grief of leaving Hillbrow, gave Jenny a feeling of comfort in thinking of the Esher cottage, from the hope that the entire change and newness of everything there might do more even than her tenderest nursing to restore Sybil to her former state.

The comfort grew stronger when they got there, and Mrs Matherson hustled out to receive them ; the good dame's rustling black-silk gown and flowery cap, donned for the occasion, contrasting with the depth of the curtsy which she considered it her duty to drop to anyone of the name of Dysart. There was consolation in the very sight of her rosy cheeks and genial smile, and in the pitying 'Pore lamb ! pore lamb !' with which, after having helped to carry Sybil to the couch prepared for her, she removed the bonnet from the fair drooping head, and then hurried away to bring in the little tray of hot tea and toast which she had in readiness for the orphan sisters.

'Dear Sybil, doesn't she look nice and comfortable ?' Jenny said, eagerly, when they were alone. 'And look how bright the little room is with flowers, and my books, and your work-table arranged just as if she knew how we used to have them ! Oh, don't you think we may be happy here in time ?' But though Sybil's native sweetness made her look and praise, and even be the first to thank their landlady for her kind forethought (thanks which the good woman eagerly disclaimed, vowing it was all the minister's doing, she had only carried out his bidding), Jenny saw that the smile which won Mrs Matherson's heart by its sweetness was piteously forced, and that when Sybil turned away her head it was to hide the tears which quenched it.

Nor did her after improvement carry out her sister's expectations. She rose each morning and came into the little parlour ; but only to sit in a big arm-chair, a book, the pages never turned, upon her knee, and her chin supported on one wasted little hand, the slender fingers of which covered her eyes from sight, and hid her melancholy musings. Sometimes, indeed, she did not get as far as this, but crept from her room to the sofa and lay there, gazing with eyes piteous in their dumb searching for something, none knew what, at the blue patch of sky visible above the pots of scarlet geranium, lobelias, and yellow-flowered musk which filled the small window and did their best to shut

out the light from the room within. Mrs Matherson grew to say, 'Pore lamb! pore pretty lamb!' oftener than ever, and to tell Jenny that it was a sight to make 'a harchangel's eart ache to see that sweet young creature pining so for 'er ma; an' all the more since pining couldn't bring the dear lady back again. Now, did Miss Jenny think a sweetbread would tempt 'er sister? If so, let 'er say the word an' in she'd go to Esher that minnit an' see if one she couldn't get for love or money.'

But though Jenny thanked her gratefully, the good woman's words had deepened an anxiety in her mind which had already been lying there for some little time, and making her own heart ache the more because, with all her love for her sister, she shrank sensitively from removing it.

Was Sybil pining for someone else besides her mother—someone who could be brought back? And if so, ought she, could she have the heart to see her suffer and say no word for her relief?

That her sister grieved deeply, incessantly, and with a self-reproach which no soothing could remove, for the death of the parent whose favourite child she had been, Jenny knew full well, but this sorrow was an open one, common to both, and holy and healing in the very simplicity of its utterance. There was something else behind, which found no vent in any spoken word; a grief betrayed only by those long hours of silent desolation, that fixed, pathetic gaze which seemed to be for ever asking a question to which there was no answer, and which was entirely distinct from the tears which fell in soft, heavy showers at the mention of her mother's name, the trembling sob with which she would now and again entreat Jenny to tell her afresh that the latter had forgiven her, had loved her to the end, would have loved and forgiven her all the same if she had known of her one act of disobedience; and must now, in heaven, be aware of her innocence of anything beyond. Sybil never spoke of her lover; never, so far as Jenny could see, wrote to him; or suggested a wish that he might be allowed to visit the humble cottage in which the sisters had found a refuge; and, as yet, Jenny's dislike and repugnance for the man was so strong that she was only too glad to imitate her sister's reticence on the subject of his name.

At Hillbrow, indeed, she could not have done otherwise. It might be natural, perhaps, for poor Sybil to crave for the love left to her, and for which she had been willing to sacrifice all other. Jenny, indeed, in the 'fierce virginity' of her youth,

knew little of that love for which the Bible has given authority, that a man and woman may 'leave father and mother and cleave only to one another ;' but her very ignorance of such matters made her shy of pronouncing on them ; and in the depth of her own tenderness for her sister she meant what she said when she told Mrs Ashleigh that whom Sybil chose she would choose. But to act on that choice in the home whose peace its unworthy object had destroyed, to bring the man whom she regarded as the cause of her mother's death, to the very house whence that mother's coffin had been carried, was a thing impossible even to Jenny's sisterly affection ; and, judging Sybil truly by herself, she felt certain that the latter would have shrunk from the idea with a repugnance even deeper than her own.

Here, at Esher, however, it was different. Mrs Dysart had told Lionel that she would not try any more to force her daughter's choice ; and therefore the latter was free in all senses to make it as she pleased, and if Gareth Vane were still the one object of her heart, no good could come of banishing him from her. Hitherto, at any rate, he had behaved with delicacy in staying away, though whether of his own will or her sister's, Jenny could not, of course, tell ; and of one thing she felt inwardly certain, that Sybil would not be the first to broach the subject of his reception. It lay with her then to make the first move ; and suppose that Sybil was really pining under the long separation from her lover, suppose that dumb longing in her eyes was for the consolation of his presence and tenderness, 'for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that was still,' would it not be the grossest selfishness in her (Jenny) to hold her peace and abstain from saying the word which might bring back colour to those sunken cheeks and brightness to those wistful eyes ?

They were sitting together as usual one afternoon, and the light of the setting sun falling on Sybil's face brought out that far-away yearning look with greater distinctness than ever, when Jenny came at last to a sudden decision on the questions with which she had been fighting so long ; and flinging the piece of needlework she was bending over aside with one of her old impetuous movements, much, indeed, as though she were flinging aside her old undivided possession of her sister with it, she got up and came to the side of the latter's sofa.

'Sybil,' she said, standing very erect, but with brow, cheeks and throat all one crimson, burning blush, 'I want to say

something to you about—about Mr Vane. You know poor mamma did not mean to separate you from him. She said so. She said she had been too harsh. And if you would like him to come here—to send for him—dear Sybil, if it would make you happier, please, please write—'

For a minute there was silence. Jenny had stopped abruptly with a dazzle in her eyes and a choke in her voice, which made her feel as if with another word she should burst out crying ; and Sybil did not move or answer. A swift, searching blush had spread all over her poor little white face, but it faded as quickly as it came, and as Jenny's eyes cleared, they met those of her sister full of a deep-set, hopeless anguish, too meek even for shame.

‘Oh no ! I could not,’ she said ; ‘and it would be no use. Jenny, be kind to me ; he—he has gone away. He does not love me any more. He has told me so. It is all—all over between us.’

CHAPTER II.

A BROKEN BUTTERFLY.

‘ALL OVER !’ repeated Jenny. The words almost took away her breath. She hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry, in the mingled shock, surprise and relief of such news. And yet that ineffable look in Sybil’s eyes—a mother would have understood it better—ay, even the most disapproving of mothers—and taken the poor crushed child to her heart ; but sisters—younger sisters—cannot quite be mothers in their tenderness, and our poor Jenny was very young. What did she know, thank God ! of the pain her sister was enduring ; the pain of abandonment by the man who had seemed like a god to her in his fatal love and beauty, when he first stooped to win her heart ? It was well for that aching heart that Jenny’s tone expressed nothing worse than absolute bewilderment.

‘Oh !’ she said, with a kind of gasp, ‘I am so—’ Then, checking herself as she saw her sister’s wasted hands go up to cover her face, and recalled the meaning of the words she had heard :—‘But, Sybil, I don’t understand. He does not love—Oh, you mean he is angry because you have broken it off. Yet one might have known you would. And he—surely he must honour you more for refusing, if he is any way worthy of you. Dear, what has he said ?’

But already Sybil was regretting having told as much as she had. The words had broken from her, wrung forth by the irresistible craving for sympathy which her sister's generosity and affection had evoked ; but the way in which Jenny took her answer, her readiness to condemn Gareth, even before she knew where he was in fault, recalled his victim to herself.

Anything but blame for him she could bear ; but not that. Her love for him was so blindly worshipping that, even though he had smitten her through the very heart, she would not blame him herself. Nay, so long as the wrong he had done her was hidden in that heart, she could draw the edges of the wound it had made over it, hold it lovingly there, forgive it ; and by the divine power of that forgiveness let her love grow still greater and put forth deeper roots than before. But would Jenny forgive him if she knew, she who was ready to cry shame on him even when she did not know that he had erred at all ? Or rather, might she not raise that cry so loud as to bring down general reproach on that cruel but dearly loved one ; reproach which might in time reach his ears, and by proving that she had betrayed him, make him love her still less ?

'Hush, hush !' she said, dropping her poor hands from her face and lifting them tremblingly to Jenny. 'He is worthy, more than worthy of me. It is not his fault. You don't understand ; only—it is all over.'

She said these words again, as if to stop any further questioning ; but not even her magnanimity could suppress the infinite sadness of the tone which uttered them ; and Jenny's eyes filled with pity at the sound of it. At that moment she felt almost willing to accept Gareth Vane for a brother, in view of the sacrifice her sister had made in renouncing him. And she was remorseful too ; she believed that she had not done that sister justice. Of late, indeed, she had begun to read Sybil's character more truly, to judge her by other rules than those by which she would judge herself ; and while loving her as much, or more than ever, to expect less from her ; but now she began to think this judgment had not been correct. Even she could not have contemplated any higher duty than to voluntarily give up the man she loved, when she was free to marry him, because that freedom had been purchased by her mother's death ; and if Sybil had done this—Sybil, so soft, so tender, to whom love was an essential—ought she not to be rewarded ? Could she be let to break her heart in silence as she was doing ? Would their mother have suffered it ?

‘Sybil dear,’ she said, vehemently, ‘this must not be. You have done it for poor mamma’s sake ; and it is very good of you, very good and noble ; but I do not believe she would wish it. She wanted your happiness before anything else ; and if it pains you so—if you love him still, why should you not marry him ? It cannot be necessary that you should both be parted and made unhappy for life.’

‘I did not deserve to be happy,’ said Sybil. Jenny was torturing her in pure ignorance ; but the poor sufferer, weak in so many ways, struggled still for strength to bear the torture and show no petulance against the sister who, she well knew, would have laid down her life for her.

It was very hard, however. She must shield Gareth ; ye to do so by assuming a heroism of which she felt herself incapable was repugnant to her—and poor Sybil was not clever at subterfuge.

‘I can’t tell you about it,’ she said, bursting into tears. ‘It is not as you think, though that would be quite sufficient reason ; but there is another as well—a reason *he* knows. He—he does not wish it himself now. Oh, Jenny, don’t go on asking me questions ! Don’t say any more about it ! Only believe that he is not to blame, not in any way, and that I cannot help loving him though I shall never see him any more—never any more.’

The last words were hardly audible. Her cough had come on with the tears ; and despite her sister’s efforts at soothing her it went on and on, growing more violent till at last her lips were suddenly reddened by a stain which sent Jenny flying in wild terror, first for Mrs Matherson and then for a doctor. The hemorrhage was over long before the latter came, however, and had been so slight altogether that he thought very little of it. After a severe attack of inflammation the lungs were naturally weak, and any violent agitation or fit of weeping might easily cause a rupture of some minute vessel. She was undoubtedly in a very low state ; but there did not seem to be much organically amiss. Let her have plenty of nourishing food, and no worry or excitement of any description. Nothing so bad as crying for a girl in that feeble condition ; and Jenny, feeling terribly guilty, and reproaching herself already with having been the cause of the accident, promised eagerly to obey, and determined that she, at any rate, would not be the first to mention Gareth Vane’s name again. How could she help being glad that the brief engagement was over ! And

Sybil had assured her again and again of the fact, and had begged her to ask no more questions. Surely it was well that she should obey, and that the man, who had come like an ill wind into their lives, should be suffered to pass away in silence. Blame him of course she would, for his coming if not for his going—nay, despite Sybil's faltering excuses, more perhaps for the latter than the former; only the blame should be in her own heart. She would mention his name no more; and perhaps—in time—What did Sybil mean by '*another reason*'? Was it not possible that, through the valley of the shadow of death she had come to recognise true gold and despise alloy? that her heart, after its short, fitful wandering, had gone back to its old owner? Ah! indeed she would be silent if such happiness were in store for them, silent and thankful too! Her great eyes shone out with nearly their old gladness at the mere thought of it.

And meanwhile Sybil, tucked up in the bed where Mrs Matherson (who thought more of the accident than the doctor did) had insisted on banishing her for the rest of the day, was reproaching herself for the alarm she had occasioned, and trembling lest her tears and bungling should have roused her sister's suspicions of the truth. Jenny was so impetuous. Who knew what she might say or do if her indignation were once roused? She watched nervously till the younger girl came into her room again, and then put up a pitiful little mouth to be kissed, whispering eagerly,—

'Dear Jenny, I'm so sorry I made such a fuss. Promise me one thing now; please do.'

'Anything in the world if you'll only not excite yourself,' said Jenny, kissing her. 'Sybil, the doctor said you were to be quiet.'

'I will; only promise me first that you will not speak about this any more, even to me. Indeed, there has been no wrong done. It is all for the best, and even mamma must forgive. I am—quite happy.'

Happy, with that face! Ay, and with that folded paper in her bosom on which her hand rested even then! But the poor little martyr had forced a smile to bear out the faltering words; and Jenny, with the gladness still in her own eyes, saw the smile only, and not what was behind it.

'Of course I will promise,' she said, readily. 'We will never speak of him or it again; and as to mamma, be comforted, darling, for she forgave you long ago. So now rest

quietly while I make you some iced lemonade. The doctor said it would do you good.'

She went away as she spoke, and Sybil was left at peace. She had succeeded. Jenny was evidently satisfied, and Gareth safe from any imputation of baseness or wrong-doing. Now she could breathe freely; but the long-drawn, quivering breath sounded far nearer to a sob, and, as she drew that paper from its hiding-place, and unfolded it for the hundredth time, her eyes were so dazzled with tears she could hardly see the words which—God pity her!—she knew too well by heart already.

This was the note Gareth had written her in the bitterness of his wrath and mortification at believing she had played fast and loose with him:—

‘MY DEAR MISS DYSART,—Thanks for your lesson on keeping faith with a woman. It might have been more courteously given, but I make no complaint. Those who live in glass-houses can’t play at stone-throwing, and probably you knew that I had already heard the news, and thought further words would be wasted on me. On the whole, I agree with you. A young woman who had jilted one man so easily before might have been expected to jilt another; and, under the circumstances, a meeting would have been out of place, and the writing to say so invidious. Again, thanks for certain very charming hours which have helped to pass an idle summer month more than pleasantly, and adieu. Pray do not trouble to answer this, or to return me my other notes. Mamma and the curate (happy man!) wouldn’t approve of any more correspondence, I’m sure, and if you go on as you have begun, you will have quite a pretty little collection of such billet-doux before long. Besides, I am just leaving England for a pleasure tour of some length, so any packet sent to me would probably arrive too late.—With best wishes and congratulations on your future, believe me, very truly yours,

GARETH VANE.’

Yes, that was all. That was what she had been carrying about in her bosom ever since; the knife which had dealt her her death-wound, and yet which, for love of the hand which had wielded it, she could not fling from her. Not the faintest idea had she as to its meaning, save only that, for some reason, his love for her was dead; that he had left her and gone away, scorning her for the very error into which he had betrayed her.

Why was it?

'A woman who has jilted one man so easily might be expected to jilt another.'

Was that true? Ah, perhaps some might say so—the Ashleighs, in their anger, or the unkind world outside; but surely not he—he who, a few weeks back, had striven so earnestly, and with such sweet, persuasive words, to show her that, as she had never given her love to Lionel, so there was no wrong or robbery in giving it to another. Nay, that to keep faithful to the former would be to perpetuate a lie, and act dishonestly instead of as a true woman. What could he mean now by changing so?

The poor child could not understand it at all. Any idea as to the wrong dating of that letter was not, of course, likely to occur to her; and the weakening effect of her illness, combined with that crushing blow of her mother's loss, prevented her from being able to originate any explanation to herself.

But for her mother's death, indeed, she would have disregarded his prohibition, and written to her lover by the very next post, to ask him what had caused this change in him, making him cast doubt and scorn on the love he had prayed for so passionately only a fortnight back, and why he had put her in so cruel a position by never keeping the appointment which he himself had made? Sybil had plenty of pride of her own on most occasions, as even Lion had proved. Had he written to her such a letter, so scornful, so insulting, she could never have answered it at all; certainly not by such tender, humble pleadings as rose to her lips again and again whenever she thought of Gareth Vane. But her love for the latter was, as I have said, unlike anything else in her life. It resembled only some fragrant, deep-hued, tropical flower, which, springing up (heaven knows how) in some English cottage-garden, fades out all the pale-coloured formal blossoms round it, by the glow and fire of its beauty; and but for that terrible judgment on her, but for the dead face lying white and mute upon its pillow in the room across the corridor, she would have answered Gareth's letter at once; and he would have got her answer, and the misunderstanding between them would have been cleared up.

To Sybil, however, feeble with sickness, and half-stunned by the shock of her lover's desertion coming on that of Miss Dysart's sudden death, the very inexplicability of Gareth's conduct seemed to show that it was not he, but God, who was punishing her. He had not deserted her. It was God who

had come between them, and she dreaded to stretch a hand to Him lest a second judgment should fall on her in consequence of the sacrilegious act. She had preferred her lover to the parent who had cherished and idolised her from the hour of her birth ; and now that parent lay dead in the next room, and God in His justice had taken her lover from her in his turn. How could she be heartless or impious enough to call him back, nay, even to receive him, if he came of his own accord.

For at first she could not believe that he had really left her. There had been some mistake, some delusion ; but it could not last. Something would clear it up ; and then, next day, he would be back at her feet, with a love more passionately fond than ever for the sorrow of having wronged her. Why, the very day after writing that cruel letter he must have seen her mother's death in the papers, and felt his heart touched to forgiveness and sympathy by the thought of what she must be suffering, and of how he had added to her pain. That announcement alone would tell him why she had not answered him ; and by-and-by, when the funeral was over and he thought she could bear to listen to him, he would write again or come to beg her forgiveness. Ah dear ! was it very wicked to long so sorely to give it, to feel that, even if they might not marry, one tender word, one farewell kiss from him were worth all other comfort in the world to her ?

It might be wicked, but I suppose it was human. At any rate, try as she might, she could not help longing for it—could not help watching for every post which came to Chadleigh End, starting at every knock at the door, and sinking back fainter, sadder and more heart-sick after each disappointment ; and it was because of this weakness in herself, and because of the shame she felt for it, that she dared not look at her mother's face ; nay, not even at the room whence she had been carried away, and where she had so often sat at her feet, or helped her to dress and undress, in the happy days before this sad hour when she had to bid both a last farewell.

It was a fortnight then since Mrs Dysart's death ; but he had neither written again, nor come, nor had he done so since ; though July had passed into August, and by this time they were in the last days of the last month of summer. She had heard of him indeed in the interim, but only once, and through the chatter of a couple of servant-girls, in an adjoining room, the day before she left Hillbrow. Someone in the village had asked Emily, their housemaid, if it was true that Miss Dysart

had quarrelled with her new lover, as he was off to Norway, with a rich widow lady and a lot of fine friends, for a yachting trip. Emily was repeating this and saying she didn't believe it, but the other servant declared she had heard it too from a labourer on Dyson's farm. Mr Vane had written to the farmer himself to tell him to send down to Southampton a fishing-rod which he had left behind, and the two maidens waxed so hot on the subject that, even if Sybil's door had not happened to be slightly open, she must have heard their exclamations on her lover's heartlessness. 'A fine thing, indeed, to be going off pleasuring and his sweetheart in such trouble! Not even to come down for the funeral! He couldn't care much for poor Miss Sybil at that rate. Mr Ashleigh now—ah! *he* was different—'

It was terrible to Sybil to lie there listening to this, more terrible even in the knowledge it afforded her that she was being talked over, pitied, and wondered about, than that her lover's threat had not been an idle one: that he had in truth left her. If God did not mean to suffer this marriage, if He looked on her as the cause of her mother's death, then perhaps it would be better that Gareth should take the initiative in their separation. It would spare him pain at any rate, ay, and her also, the pain of refusing him anything—that is, if she could refuse him; and so long as she knew that he was happy, and could fancy that in his heart he loved her still, her love for him was great enough to have borne its own sorrow in resignation, and survived it. But to know that others, her social inferiors, were gossiping over her grief, and putting their own vulgar constructions on it, that she, the very pink of propriety and refinement, the object of so much envy and admiration in former days, was being pitied by servant-maids, and discussed by village idlers and farm-labourers, was terrible to her—a pain which had no counterbalancing good for another, to enable her to support it, but which, by its very pettiness, was a perpetual humiliation to her. Nor was this the worst form of humiliation that poor Sybil had to endure. It was all very well for Jenny to try to hide from her the cruel slander of which Mrs Ashleigh had told her, and to which Gareth's disappearance and her sister's illness and seclusion lent a horrible colouring of truth. Jenny, indeed, while crying hot tears over it in private, prayed that no whisper of it might reach Sybil's ears to insult them: but slander will penetrate through the thickest walls, and, without knowing of what she was accused, poor Sybil felt that she was under a

slur, that people were holding aloof from them on her account, and that her fair name had suffered in consequence of that terrible night, the very thought of which made her shudder with shame and misery.

Did she not know that she had had to give Jenny money to fee that vile old man, more for keeping his tongue quiet than for any service he had rendered her; and that Jenny had come back from the interview with burning cheeks and a manner painfully avoidant of all allusion to what had taken place in it? The Ashleighs too—Sybil knew them well enough to feel sure that, however vexed they might be at her treatment of Lionel, that alone would not have sufficed to make them withdraw themselves entirely from two orphan girls, who had almost grown up among their own children, just when the latter most needed their kindness and assistance; and more especially when Lionel himself was giving both with a cordial generosity, which showed sufficiently that he at any rate bore no malice for the injury done him. She knew that both the ladies had called once since Mrs Dysart's death—the baronet's wife while she was too ill to see anyone, and Mrs Ashleigh later; but Jenny had come up to her with eyes so swollen with weeping from the second visit, and had striven so pointedly to avoid answering any questions about it, that Sybil, who had grown pitifully timid of late, felt something unpleasant was behind, and dropped her inquiries as falteringly as she had put them.

That people were talking disrespectfully of her she felt sure. Servants had looked strangely, and dropped half-spoken words. People who had run after them with admiring persistency, now either took no notice of them at all, or contented themselves with a formal card of inquiry. Jenny had once asked her, blushing violently, how long exactly it was before Jowl had come to her rescue that night; and since their removal, Sybil herself had received a note from the old man, filthy beyond conception, smelling strongly of tobacco, and to this effect,—

‘ DEERE MISS,—This kums ter say as i ham not akountable fur any storys as is agoin about has ter that theer unfortnit advencher o yours. The folks has spredds em lies throuw want o knollige, as is lucky i can pruve an' will be appy so to dew if so bes as you keer to make it wurth the wile of Your Humble Wellwisher,
ISAC JOWL.’

Poor Sybil! Is it necessary to describe her feelings at read-

ing such a letter addressed to her? She crumpled it up shud-
deringly, and thrust it into the flame of the candle almost before
her eyes had mastered its contents; but though she had not
answered or done anything about it, she could not get it out of
her mind. What could such a man say for her that would not
be worse than the worst that was said against her by anyone else?
But oh! how terrible that there should be anything said at all,
and of her who had done nothing, and who shrank from nothing
so keenly as the slightest infringement on her maidenly dignity
and fair fame! It had to do with Gareth, of course, probably
with his sudden disappearance at the very hour when her mother's
death left him free to woo and wed her. Perhaps they were
saying that he had quarrelled with her, or that she had jilted
him too; but how could she explain matters and clear herself
without blackening him? There was the difficulty. If he had
only written a little gently, a little courteously; if he had given
some reason for not keeping that unlucky appointment, it would
have been different; but to put her own conduct in its true light
she must take Jenny into her confidence, and show her that
insolent, heartless letter; and what would Jenny think of him
if she did so? What would anyone think? Ah no, no! better
bear any guesses at blame in silence, rather than by casting it
on her lover hold him up to opprobrium. He might have
ceased to love her altogether, he might never come back, but
if he did, he should find that even if all this killed her, the
heart he had broken had been large enough to hide his offences
in its shelter, and seek no sympathy or compassion from the
judgment of an unprejudiced world.

It was characteristic of Sybil in all this that she never stopped
to ask herself whether the man who had been capable of dealing
so heartlessly with her were worthy of the tender consideration
she lavished on him; characteristic of her that she should care
so much for what people thought of him, and so little for what
he was in himself; that with such real and terrible woes to
crush her, she should have room for fretting over the coldness
of acquaintances or the gossip of strangers. To Jenny such a
thing would not have been possible. Nay, she was not even
capable of comprehending it in her sister; but poor Sybil was
different. To her nature, soft, somewhat shallow, caring greatly
for praise and approbation, anything like coldness or censure
came like a blight, affecting her far more at times than the
cause that gave rise to it. Jenny had once questioned with
George Eliot whether it were better to 'be worthy the writing,

or to write worthy the reading and the world's delight,' but to Sybil there would have been something better still, namely, the 'world's delight' itself. To be that, no matter how, would have been life and light to her, just as to be shunned and put on one side, as she was now, was darkness and death. And ill, almost dying as she actually was, under the combined shock of her mother's death and her lover's desertion, not even the terrible circumstances of the former could save her from the additional pang, however miserably small in comparison, of feeling that 'other people' were laying that death at her door.

Terribly small and unheroic all this seems; a weakness of character utterly unlike a heroine of romance; or for that matter any heroine at all; and yet there was heroism in this poor little maid who had borne herself so sweetly and graciously in the sunshine, and who now, wounded at every point, heart-broken, and sinking from shame, sorrow and unkindness, could still kiss the hand which stabbed her, and without one resentful murmur could deny herself the only comfort left her, of sympathy and consolation, for the sake of the very one who had deprived her of everything else.

A love unworthy of her! Ay, verily; but none the less a true love, and so, worthy of honour like all true things. Stephen, standing amidst his murderers with the glory of the Son of God shining in his face, was no more a martyr than the small Chinese street Arab stoned to death by his white brothers for the sake of the worthless delf idol he carries in his bosom.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE CURATE'S STUDY.

'I MUST say, my dear Lionel, I can see no call for you to do so,' said Mrs Ashleigh.

It was rather a cold day in the early part of September, and she was seated by a recently-lit fire in her son's study, warming her feet and talking over her shoulder to the owner of the apartment, who was busied in sorting a heap of parish books with an air of vexation and discomposure with which his harmlessly uninteresting occupation had assuredly no connection.

Autumn seemed to have set in early this year, with day after day of fierce equinoctial gales, interspersed with heavy thunder-

storms which chilled the air, and gusts of rain which pattered on the window, made dreary pools in the gravel, and scattered over the wet lawns and garden walls showers of rose and geranium petals.

To-day the rain had ceased, but it was still blowing hard, and the air, as I have said, was cold enough to make the fire, which Lionel's old housekeeper had made haste to light directly she saw 'madam's' carriage turning in at the gate, the reverse of unacceptable; while the wildly-swaying branches of the trees outside the window, and the moaning of the wind in the chimney, imparted an air of dreariness to the surroundings, which set Mrs Ashleigh shivering in spite of it.

Perhaps the dreariness was inside the room as well, and affected the visitor unconsciously, as such things will; for since we last saw Lionel in it several changes had been effected there, which as they stood at present had not had the result of improving it. A venerable yew-tree which used to shade it from without, and dominate with its low-spreading branches a square of soft green grass, had been cut down to gratify a prejudice of Sybil's that yews were only fit for graveyards; and the turf cut up into flowerbeds, which, when filled, would doubtless present a bright and pretty vista from the window, but which in their present brown and empty condition looked more like newly-made graves of eccentric patterns than anything else, and suggested the desirability of the yew-tree more than ever. A bookcase, too, had been taken away from one wall of the study, its contents heaped in untidy piles upon the floor; and its place filled by a doorway, at present minus the door, and communicating with the drawing-room by a passage roofed and walled with glass, lined with shelves, and floored with pure white tiles. This was Lionel's latest alteration, designed, without the knowledge of his betrothed, in order both to give her a conservatory, which the house did not before possess, and to enable her to pass in and out between the drawing-room and his study, and give him the pleasure of looking at her while he was at work in the latter, and she among her flowers.

Nothing, indeed, in all the pleasant preparations for his wife's home-coming had been more pleasant to him than this miniature greenhouse. He knew, without grumbling at the knowledge, that Sybil's love of 'sermons in stones' or in 'books' was not great, and that therefore the study in itself would not offer much attraction to her; but he also knew her passionate fondness for flowers; and so, while glaziers and carpenters were

filling the house with noise and confusion, and his own beloved books were torn ruthlessly down from their shelves and tossed about anywhere on floors and sofas, he had pleased himself with the thought of filling those shelves with all the rarest and brightest plants procurable, and draping the roof and walls with her favourite creepers, and had sat at his desk as happy as a king in the thought of the peaceful days to come, when he should lift his eyes and see a fair little head and slender shape flitting to and fro among the brilliant-coloured blossoms, or hear the voice, which always sounded like soft music to him, calling him to leave his 'stupid papers' and come and look at that opening bud or admire this spreading fern.

But, alas! that vision had passed away, now never to be fulfilled. The alterations had been abruptly stopped, the workmen dismissed; and of all his dream only the empty doorway and bare, glaring passage remained, giving to view a drawing-room, half-stripped of the old paper to make room for Moris's latest design, and with the furniture piled up in the middle of the floor and covered with dust sheets, sarcophagus-wise; a passage which merely served as a vehicle for draughts, and gave a naked, half-built appearance to the whole place, which could hardly fail to depress the most strong-minded.

It is scarcely to be wondered at, therefore, that Mrs Ashleigh never felt less forgivingly to Sybil than on the occasions when she paid her son a visit; and never looked round at all the pathetic evidences of the love and forethought he had wasted on her without a fresh glow of what she called her 'pagan ire' against the girl who had so ungratefully repaid him. It was in reference to her that she was speaking at present, and, perhaps, the draught through that empty doorway, coming in upon the back of her neck, lent a tone of unwonted sharpness to her remark.

The annoyance on Lionel's brow deepened as he answered her,—

'I am sorry for it, mother; but it is you who have obliged me to it.'

'I! How?'

'By not doing the thing yourself. If you had gone to see those poor girls, there would be no need for me to do it.'

'My dear Lion, I thought I had told you that Jenny most emphatically—vehemently, I may say—begged that I would not do so; and in any case, after all that has been said by others—'

‘Others! What others? Do you mean my father? I can’t imagine anyone else having the right to control your visits, except, indeed, the people you are going to; and if you didn’t tell me that Jenny declined your friendship I couldn’t believe that. As it is, I own I can’t help thinking that you must have been mistaken.’

‘I am not in the habit of making mistakes on such subjects,’ said Mrs Ashleigh coldly. ‘Jenny disappointed me greatly. I am sorry for her, of course, and I will say she was in a great state of excitement; but nothing could be plainer than the words in which she told me that her sister’s choice and her sister’s friends were her choice and her friends, and that as I was not among the latter she would rather neither see nor come to me.’

‘You having first told her that you were not among the latter, I suppose?’ said Lion, looking at her keenly.

With all his own natural frankness he was by no means simple, and had a remarkable aptitude for exposing anything like misrepresentation in another; but the truth as we look at it is not always the truth as it is, and though as upright in thought and word as her son, Mrs Ashleigh had been too much offended, and, to use a word she would have scorned, too much ‘upset,’ in that interview with her deceased friend’s daughter, to be able to see the facts of it with eyes sufficiently clear from prejudice to view them absolutely correctly. She drew up her fine figure now with some indignation.

‘You are quite wrong, Lion; I had been most kind to Jenny about Sybil—far kinder than I felt. Indeed, I don’t believe I even alluded to her disgraceful conduct to you—Well, well,’ as Lion coloured up and made an impatient gesture, ‘I won’t do so now, dear, for I know it pains you; but it was disgraceful—most utterly so, as I am sure anyone looking round this room must feel; and I don’t think nine mothers out of ten would have had anything more to do with such a girl or her family, no matter what happened to them.’

‘Then I hope my mother will always be the tenth,’ said Lion warmly; ‘for if she were petty and ungenerous enough to be anything else, I shouldn’t respect her as I do. But what did you say then? There must have been something.’

‘Nothing that was not most kind,’ persisted Mrs Ashleigh, strong in the consciousness of her own benevolent intentions and the effort she had made to carry them out. ‘I never even refused to see Sybil (for that matter Jenny did not ask me to

do so) or to receive her ; and I positively went out of my way to offer to do all in my power to help her ; not for her own sake, I own, but because of my affection for her poor mother, and because, if she were innocent of this scandal which has got about respecting her doings that night, I would, as I told Jenny—'

‘Told Jenny !’ repeated Lion. He had flung down the parish books and was standing in front of his mother, his eyes widely opened, his face so pale with indignation, that, perfectly in the right as she felt herself to be, she grew quite nervous. ‘Mother, you don’t mean that you spoke to her—that pure, innocent child—about a vile slander, which a man like myself would be ashamed to listen to ? You never dared to pollute her ears with such—filth !’

‘My dear Lion, I beg you will not offend mine by using such coarse language,’ said Mrs Ashleigh, colouring with very natural offence. ‘If it were a slander—but that is just the question which it was necessary to solve before one could be of any use to the girl—and if you were not a young man, and very hasty and hot-headed, you would see as much for yourself. Indeed, as it is, I think you might credit your mother with sufficient delicacy not to wish to have anything to do with so painful a matter unless it were for the good of others, and also not to do so in a way which any girl, however pure, could feel insulting.’

‘I beg your pardon, mother,’ said Lion, bending down to kiss her. ‘I suppose I did speak thoughtlessly ; but it seemed so abominable that a girl like Jenny should even hear of it. However, I suppose I can guess the rest. Of course, she indignantly denied the whole story, and was very much offended with you for even listening to it ; and you—’

‘No, my dear, you are wrong,’ put in Mrs Ashleigh quietly. ‘She did deny it at first, and very excitedly ; but when pressed as to facts (for of course it was as needful to know what was true as what was false) she began to hesitate at once, bungled, looked miserable ; and was obliged to own that there was something she could not tell ; and that she and her sister had better drop our acquaintance. In fact, she volunteered that, and in the most decided manner. It was very painful to me, I assure you, the whole thing ; for I am exceedingly fond of the child, and I feel greatly for her. Indeed, if Lord Dysart had adopted her sister, or this man had married her at once, I would have brought Jenny home to the rectory without caring what anyone said. I told her so.’

'And I can imagine with what effect,' said Lion quietly.

'But, of course, under the circumstances,' Mrs Ashleigh went on, 'one could do nothing. It is very shocking altogether; but one can only hope it is not all true.'

'Unless you can believe that it is all a lie, as I should in any question affecting the honour of those two girls.'

'Did Sybil treat you honourably? My dear boy, I am older than you, and I believe in the proverb, "No smoke without some fire." The only hopeful part of this affair is, as your father says, that there are two different accounts of her doings in it. The first, you know, was that she met this man Vane at the station and went up to London with him, only returning in the morning; but now they say she and her lover met at the cottage of some old poacher or herb-seller on the heath, and that the latter brought her home next day. Poor girl! it is very dreadful, and, anyhow, it shows that she must have been more weak than wicked, or she would have left this Mr Vane when she found out his true character; but I fear there can be no doubt that the shock and shame of it all combined killed her poor mother. As for the De Boonyens, they declare that they know the latter story to be the true one, only that it was Vane who left the girl, and that old Cowl—Jowl—I forget the herbalist's name, boasts of being better acquainted with the pretty young miss's affairs than anyone else. Mrs De Boonyen, indeed, is quite furious at ever having been "induced" to visit at Hillbrown. She even sent Horatia Maude out into the garden while she was speaking to me about it.'

'I am glad to hear that she had some respect for her own daughter, if she showed none for other people's; and I hope you told her that the very fact of there being two diametrically different reports about a person proved conclusively that one must be a lie; and, therefore, gave one *prima facie* grounds for disbelieving both. I should have done so.'

'With truth, Lion?' asked his mother, looking at him.

'Of course; should I have said it otherwise? Sybil Dysart may have injured me; but I do not believe she would elope with any man, whether she thought he would marry her or not. I know her too well for that.'

'I wish I had your faith, my dear boy. Unfortunately, I have seen too much of the world and young girls and their lovers to have a large stock of credulity on hand. It is a comfort to have a son in whose guilelessness I can believe, though he does think himself wiser than I am.'

‘And if you had a daughter, would you not believe in hers? Well, my dear mother, if I am not wiser than you, I mean to make myself so very soon; and then I hope not only to teach you to believe in poor Sybil Dysart, but to go to Esher and tell her so. For one clue to these slanders I am obliged to you. This man Jowl is a thoroughly bad character, and I have been trying to get him out of the parish ever since I came into it. He sells quack nostrums to silly servant-girls, and Mrs Dysart helped me very much by forbidding any of hers to go to him under pain of dismissal. I believe she carried out the threat in one case, for which I don’t doubt he has had a grudge against the Dysart family ever since; but he’s afraid of me on account of something which he knows I know about him, and I can promise you this: whatever he has to say he shall say to me, and then shut his mouth on the subject for good and all. The rest of the story concerns Mr Vane, and I shall recommend him to take hold of it.’

‘But, my dear boy, are you the person to do this?’ Mrs Ashleigh broke in, flushing uneasily. ‘Let Mr Vane take care of his wife’s honour (if she is to be his wife) if he chooses; but why should you stir in the matter, you who, of all men, can have nothing to do with it?’

‘Because I am the clergyman of this parish, and therefore I think it is just I who have to do with it,’ said Lionel, sturdily. ‘In these cases the person to act for a girl is her father or nearest male relation, and, failing these, her clergyman. Sybil and Jenny are fatherless, poor girls! and their only relation is out of England, and knows little and cares less about them; so if I didn’t stir myself for their protection, who would? Besides, there’s another thing, mother; I promised Mrs Dysart I would take care of Sybil, and though I was her lover then, I should have given the promise just the same if we had only been friends. They have no brother, and their house has been a second home to me ever since I left college. I think I am the person to help them if they want help.’

Mrs Ashleigh got up and kissed him.

‘You are a dear, good, noble boy,’ she said, with a little sigh, testifying to an old consciousness of how useless it was ever to try to move Lionel when he thought himself in the right. ‘Don’t think I can’t appreciate your generosity. The only thing is that I fear there are people who won’t, and that even those who understand you will call you quixotic, while others— My dear Lionel, do think what construction the

world in general will put on your magnanimity in running after these girls.'

An expressive jerk of her son's broad shoulders might have answered her without words.

'Should be sorry to waste even half a thought on such a subject ; still less to let it interfere with my duty.'

'But is it your duty? Dear boy, don't be testy or wrong-headed. You know how entirely your father goes on the principle of non-interference with you. You have always gone your own way, even in the matter of your engagement, where most parents expect to have a voice, and though we both thought you might have done better, and— But that is past and done with, and, as papa says, now—'

'Has my father said anything? You talked of other people just now, the idle gossips of this gossiping place, and for them I tell you frankly I don't care a hang ; but you and my father are quite different, and if he thinks I have done wrong in any way with regard to these poor motherless girls, I am quite willing to listen to his reasons for that opinion.'

'Not wrong, my dear. Your father doesn't think that at all. Indeed, when we heard all you had done at the time of the funeral, we both agreed that it was most noble of you. The only thing is, as he said, was it not rather quixotic? It doesn't do to pose as the Knight of La Mancha in these mocking days, and we are afraid that ill-natured people may say that you are weak enough to want to win the girl back to you.'

'Let them say it.'

'That would not be pleasant, even if one knew it to be untrue ; and, my dear Lion, I am sure you could not stoop—you have too much self-respect. Now, don't look at me in that way. I should not have alluded to anything so unlikely if you had not spoken of going over to Esher when you were with us last night ; and afterwards your father got so uneasy lest you should be led into compromising yourself in any way, that I promised I would drive here this morning and see you. Of course, I know how absurd it is even to imagine you could do such a thing : take a girl back who— My dear, it would be as impossible to you as to me.'

'And yet you are imagining it, and thinking it quite possible for me, in your heart,' said Lion, looking at her full in the face.

He had quite got over his irritation now, and spoke with more calmness and gravity than he had done yet. His mother

met his glance as frankly. The two faces looked wonderfully alike at the moment.

'Women can talk themselves into imagining anything,' she said, smiling, 'and yet feel the folly and absurdity of their imaginations at the same time. I will think nothing of you, my dear, but what you tell me I may; only, remember, you did love this girl very passionately once. She is exceedingly pretty and winning, and if—if that man should not marry her—'

'Couldn't you put it, if she should not marry him? I think that very probable. There never was a mother more dutifully loved than poor Mrs Dysart, and from what Jenny says in a note to me, I cannot gather that Mr Vane is any more received at the Esher cottage than he was at Hillbrow. Where is it? Ah, there! Read it for yourself if you like;' and he took the letter in question from a heap on the table, and tossed it lightly into his mother's lap.

Mrs Ashleigh read it aloud—

"DEAR LION,—Many thanks for the auctioneer's receipt, and, as usual, for the flowers. How beautifully you pack them! They arrive as fresh as—"

(*Flowers!* What flowers? Have you been sending them any?) Mrs Ashleigh interrupted herself to ask, with eyebrows raised expressively.

Lion nodded in the most matter-of-fact manner.

'Their own; out of the Hillbrow garden, you know. The landlord gave me leave while it was still unlet. But go on.)

"—as possible, and are just the brightest things in my life," Mrs Ashleigh read, with eyebrows still up in token of protest. "I think I shall take to talking to them soon, in default of anyone else. Fancy, it will be two months to-morrow since I have spoken to any living soul except my sister, Mrs Mather-son, and the doctor. Even Sybil has had more exercise for her tongue, as she had to talk to the clergyman when he called on her (once); but that is all: so guess if I wasn't glad to get your letter and the basket. I have just carried the roses into my sister's room, to gladden her eyes (she has been worse again these last few days), and now write this to thank you, and say how glad I am my little Montbretia Potosi is flowering. If you think it won't hurt it, do take it up and carry it to your mother. She wanted one, and mamma got it for her; but I was to try first whether it would flower well in the open. Take her, too, any white gladioli that there are, instead of sending them to us.

You know how fond she is of them, and poor mamma always kept the first for her. I have found two new fungi near here which you will receive packed in a seidlitz-powder box. Let me have the names on a postcard, I can't fix them myself; and good-bye, dear Lion.—Yours affectionately, JENNY."

Even Mrs Ashleigh's eyebrows had gone down during the reading of the letter; perhaps because the eyes beneath them had filled in an unaccountable manner.

'Poor little Jenny!' she said, as softly as motherly Lady Ashleigh herself could have spoken. 'It is very hard on her. *She is innocent, at any rate.*'

'You shall have the plant now, if you like,' Lion answered gruffly; 'I can cut across the park to Hillbrow and get it up for you while you are driving round. I know Mrs Dysart meant it for you; only, as Jenny says, we wanted to see if it was a good bulb and flowered well.'

Mrs Ashleigh gave her head a little shake, and in doing so cleared her eyes.

'Not to-day, dear; any time will do,' she said, trying to resume her ordinary tone. 'And as for the gladioli, that is nonsense, of course. I will write to Jenny. I suppose, then, it was this,' touching the letter, 'which made you determine to go and see them; but that is unnecessary. I will do so myself. Set your mind at rest about it.'

'Thanks, but I don't see how that can be,' said Lion simply. 'Didn't you tell me that Jenny declined to see you on account of the opinion you had formed of her sister? You haven't altered that opinion. Why should Jenny alter her decision? As for me, I shall just walk over and inquire for them at the door. She can see me or not, as she pleases; but I am a different matter. I believe in Sybil as firmly as I do in you.'

'Thank you—' began Mrs Ashleigh; but Lion stopped her. 'I do. Don't be offended. You are the best woman in the world to me; but even you make mistakes sometimes; and you've made one now in listening to the foul gossip of a set of scandalmongers against an innocent girl; and another in thinking (as you are still thinking at this moment) that because I can pity and defend the latter I must be in love with her.'

'My dear boy, I said—' Mrs Ashleigh tried to put in; but Lion would not listen.

'My dear mother, we had better be frank with one another.

It is quite true,' his fair square-jawed face colouring all over like a girl's, 'that I did love her—once. I loved her with my whole heart, and if she had been my wife I should have thought myself the happiest fellow in this world. To me she still is, and always will be, the prettiest, gentlest, and sweetest girl I've ever known ; and whoever she loves will be a deuced deal luckier than most men deserve to be ; but— Well, but that's all. The rest is all done 'with. Of course it was an awful blow when it happened, and I found out that she didn't care, and, what was worse, never had cared for me. It's an awful blow to lose an arm or a leg ; but if I had lost one, I'd rather tie a bandage over the stump, and go about maimed and content to be so for the rest of my life, than get a wax one and make believe as I waggle it about that it's my old limb, just as good as ever, or better. It wouldn't be as good. It would be a sham, nothing more ; and any reunion between her—Sybil—and me (even if she were free to make it) would be a sham also. I'd do almost anything in the world for her for the sake of auld lang syne, and of that brave little Jenny who bears the brunt of everything without a complaint, but I couldn't marry her—not even if she were to come and ask me to do so. Marriage is different from anything else. A man's wife should be his very own—all of her—with not one closed door between her heart and his. I couldn't live in a house with a Bluebeard's closet in it ; and I couldn't marry a woman with a Bluebeard's closet in her heart from me ; and what's more, I've always had a rooted feeling that I could never want a girl for my wife who had ever loved another man as a husband ; and I have it still. Second-hand kisses may be just as sweet in reality, but it's a sweetness I don't care about ; and whether Sybil Dysart marries Mr Vane or not, she will never seem less his property to me ; and nothing in this world or the next could give me back the same feeling I had for her when I thought her mine. Now you know all about it, so I'll go and see if my dame has made you a cup of tea yet.'

' My dear,' said Mrs Ashleigh, when she got home to her husband, ' I think we need not be too anxious about Lion. He will go his own way—I don't know, by the way, if there ever was a mule in your family ; if not, I suppose there must have been in mine—and, of course, he will be talked about and laughed at. *Cela va sans dire* ; but I don't think he will do anything foolish or undignified ; and the only thing for us is to find him a wife somewhere else and as soon as possible.

That ghastly conservatory and drawing-room have given me the blues. Poor dear old boy! How could that girl have been such a fool as to let him go!

‘I wonder if the other fellow has jilted her?’ said the rector. ‘Well, well; I can’t help feeling sorry for both the lasses, poor children! Sybil, I grant you, was never much more than a sweet silly bit of Sèvres china, for all Lion’s worship of her; but there was something in Jenny. I was really fond of that child.’

‘That is fortunate,’ said Mrs Ashleigh, with a peculiar tightening at the corners of her mouth, ‘for I shouldn’t much wonder—H’m, it would be rather ridiculous, though; and how we should be laughed at!’

CHAPTER IV.

JENNY’S BIRTHDAY VISITOR.

‘Now, I wonder if he remembered that it was my birthday, and meant to give me one bit of pleasure, at any rate, on it?’ said Jenny to herself. ‘Anyhow, if he didn’t, Providence did, so I can be thankful to someone without any waste of gratitude. Oh dear! oh dear! how nice it will be to see him again, and—but I wonder if Sybil will like it.’

She was sitting at the breakfast-table, an empty coffee-cup and toast-rack, and an eggshell from which the interior had been similarly despoiled, testifying at once to the frugality of the repast, and the completeness with which it had been despatched, while in her hand she held a postcard, the contents of which she was devouring with even greater zest than she had brought to her meal; but though she lifted her eyes quickly at the last thought, it was not to Sybil’s face. The chair opposite to her was empty, the table only laid for one, and it was nothing but the force of habit which had made her raise her eyes to appeal to her sister, who, for many days now, had been too much of an invalid to make her appearance at breakfast-time.

At first, indeed, after that conversation in which Sybil confessed that her engagement was at an end, she had seemed to grow better instead of worse—not much better, perhaps, or very much stronger; but showing a gentle, gradual improvement, which, to Jenny’s infinite joy, found an echo in a less

mournful tone of voice, and an occasional brightness in the eyes, of late so dimmed and saddened.

To speak the truth, however, these last changes for the better were chiefly due to Sybil's own efforts not to let her sister see that she was mourning for the lover whom the former had been so ready to give her credit for renouncing ; but I think the very fact of having spoken of him at all, of having broken down, by her own avowal, the dread which had been hanging over her of being questioned as to his whereabouts and intentions, and of having by the same confession shown her right to a little private sorrow on his account, without attracting either blame or suspicion to him, had done her good unawares. She began to occupy herself a little, which (even if the occupation was only a bit of crewel-work) was of service to her ; and to go out, at first only thickly veiled and in a Bath chair, but later for a turn in the lane, leaning on Jenny's arm ; and finally, as far as the common, which, broken and gorse-covered, and sported over by myriads of butterflies, white, blue and bronze-coloured, reminded her of that at Chadleigh, where she and her sister had raced each other in the sunshine, in the days when they first came to live at Hillbrow, and where later she had met Gareth Vane and owned her love for him. Alas ! that last was an unfortunate reminder bringing with it such a flood of sudden, irrepressible tears as no veil could conceal, and as frightened Jenny half out of her senses, and made her terribly repentant of having coaxed her sister so far. But Sybil would not turn back even then, or allow that anything was wrong. She sat down on a grassy knoll and leant her head against Jenny's shoulder ; and, though the tears continued to flow, the sparkling sunshine which changed them into diamonds as they started, and the fresh breeze which dried them on her cheek as they fell, were not without their effect. Had not the breeze ruffled and flirted with her just so when she and Gareth stood hand-in-hand among the apple-scented furze-bloom on Chadleigh Heath ? Had not the sunshine laughed in her eyes just as gaily the day he sealed their blue beatitude with passionate kisses ? And if nature could be so much the same here as there, why should he be different ? Why might he not appear some day on this common as suddenly as he had done on that, and tell her that this misery was all a mistake, and that he loved her still as he had loved her then ?

To Jenny's joy and surprise she proposed herself next day to take the same walk ; and after that it became the rule to do so

every morning, Sybil's steps turning instinctively towards the common directly they left the cottage ; while she rejected with nervous timidity any suggestion to vary the sameness of the walk by a visit to the village, or even to the more frequented parts of the common itself.

Unfortunately, while out on one of these daily promenades, they happened to be caught in a heavy shower at a farther distance from the cottage than they had ever been before. Neither of the girls had an umbrella with her ; and Jenny, in her dread lest Sybil should get wet through and be laid up afresh, hurried her home at almost running speed. It was that exertion, indeed, far more than the wetting, which did the mischief ; for the hemorrhage which came on again almost as soon as she was in her room was more serious than the first one, and infinitely worse for her than the cold which, despite the hurrying, she managed to catch into the bargain. No one but herself knew of the former, however : after all it was not very violent, and did not last long ; and as the previous one had left no apparent ill effects behind it she thought little of its recurrence, and only kept it to herself lest the others should be frightened by it into preventing her from going any more to the common, where the poor child nursed a faint, foolish hope of once more encountering her fickle lover.

She would keep quiet for a day or two, she thought, and then she would be all right again and able to resume her walks ; but before the day or two were out the change in the weather, ushered in by that sudden shower, showed itself more decidedly. With the beginning of September, wind, rain and frequent thunderstorms set in, as I have said ; and though she still went out whenever a sunny afternoon or calm interval permitted the indulgence, it was evident that she had lost strength. The least puff of wind, the gentlest incline, made her stop and pant, her steps grew slower and more faltering, once or twice she complained of a pain in her side, and for more than a week now she had yielded to Jenny's persuasions and stayed in bed until the noonday sun had warmed the cottage parlour, and made it pleasanter for her reception.

As that luminary, though dancing on the latticed panes of Mrs Matherson's chamber above, had not yet touched the purple clematis which straggled over the parlour window, Jenny knew that Sybil would not be thinking of getting up for another hour ; and therefore pushed back her chair and went off to find her, postcard in hand.

'Guess who is coming here to-day!' she said, entering the inner room with an almost dancing step, and holding the missive high over her head.

Sybil very nearly sprang out of bed. The one thought in her mind at the moment—alas! the one thought always there—was Gareth. It was he who was coming. He had written to say so. At last she should know what had come between them. It all passed through her mind in a second, while yet the sudden leaping at her heart choked her voice too much to ask a question; and before Jenny, alarmed at the white excitement of her sister's face, could hurry out an explanatory word—

'It is Lion. He has written about it. Dear Sybil, did I startle you? Were you asleep? I am so sorry.'

Sybil had sunk back upon her pillow. The whiteness of the shock had gone off in a crimson blush, flooding face and throat, and even filling her eyes with tears. How foolish, how weak she had been! As if Jenny would have looked like that if it had been he. And—and suppose she had betrayed herself.

'You did startle me,' she said, with the touch of plaintive pettishness which was her nearest approach to temper; 'and I don't understand now. Lion Ashleigh coming here! What for?'

'Only to inquire for us,' said Jenny, much subdued in her glee by the tone of the question. "See, he says, "I shall be walking over your way to-morrow afternoon, and will call at the cottage to inquire for you. Don't see me unless you like. I can't come in anyhow; but I want to know how you both are, and if there is anything I can do for you.—L. A." Isn't that like him, Sybil? I believe it is because I mentioned in my last letter that you were not so well. But would you rather he did not come? I hoped you wouldn't mind, now.'

'I should mind seeing him very much,' said Sybil, trying to recover herself, though she still spoke very falteringly; 'but of course it is very kind of him, wonderfully so. Dear Jenny,' catching sight of her sister's downcast expression, and desirous to counteract the effect of her words, 'don't think me churlish. I am very glad you should see him, and on your birthday too, it will cheer you up.'

'Yes, I was glad he should be coming on my birthday,' said Jenny, rather disconsolately, 'for it did seem— Well, birthdays used to be such happy days at home, and I couldn't help thinking of the last one while I was dressing this morning, and feeling a little down. But if it pains you, Sybil—I thought—that is, I had hoped—you might see him.'

Sybil shook her head.

'No, dear,' she said, gently, 'I could not do that, nor would he wish it. I have injured him too much, and he has not forgotten enough. Don't you see that he says he will not come in? He knows as well as I do that any meeting between us could only be pain to both. But, all the same, that must not keep him away, especially after his taking such a long 'cross-country walk to see us. You must make him come in, Jenny. Tell him that I am not leaving my room till the evening. It will be true for to-day; and I can tell you one thing, it will be the pleasantest day I shall have spent since we came here, if I know that you are having some pleasantness too. Do you think I don't guess how you miss all the old home faces, although you never say anything about it? I am glad that he should come here.'

But though this assurance, and the pale little smile which came out to give it force, comforted Jenny, and helped her to persuade herself that it was only because Sybil was conscious of the revival of her old feelings for Lionel that she shrank remorsefully from seeing him, the curate was not to be so easily moved. Jenny had been on the watch for him for an hour before he came, had dusted the parlour, arranged and re-arranged the furniture to look as like a Hillbrow room as possible, put fresh water to the flowers, and spread out Sybil's just completed antimacassar over the shabby old sofa-back; but when all was done it was wasted trouble; for Lion was quite firm about not coming in, and it was only the blank look in poor Jenny's face when he persisted in his refusal which moved him to suggest that she should come for a walk with him instead.

'You're horribly pale, Jenny, and the air will do you good. I don't believe you take half exercise enough. Come back a bit of the way with me; we have lots to say to one another.'

'*Tons!*' said Jenny, emphatically, and flew off to obtain permission from her sister, whom she persisted in treating as the head of the family at present; though in every matter, except that of any enjoyment for herself, it was she who ruled and arranged everything, and watched over Sybil with all the solicitude and authority of a young mother.

She was back in five minutes at present, hatted and jacketted; and with eyes shining so joyously under the black dreariness of her crape veil that Lion felt his heart touched to an uncomfort-

able extent. He had been feeling enough for her before; but how sad her life must have grown if the mere idea of a walk with him could give her such pleasure!

He began, nevertheless, to scold her at once. What did she mean by cutting her old friends? Why had she never answered Adelaide's letter? Adelaide was ill in London, and her mother was with her; but she had told him that she had written to Jenny Dysart and had had no reply. And why, above all, had she snubbed his mother and prevented her from coming to see them?

'They're both awfully hurt about it, I can tell you, Jenny; the mother especially. She feels things more than people think, little as she says. Yesterday there were tears in her eyes when she was talking about you. Why are you so unkind to her?'

'I did not mean to be unkind,' said poor Jenny, greatly quenched in her cheerfulness, but a little proud withal. 'Ada was very good-natured, and so was your mother. They meant to be so, at least; but there was a reason— Please, Lion, don't say anything more. I can't tell you about it. It is best as it is.'

'Best that you should live as you are doing now, shut away from all your friends and everyone that loves you!' said Lion. 'Nonsense, Jenny! you'll make me angry if you talk in that way; and even if you could stand it (you were always a bit of a hermit-crab), Sybil couldn't. You know how she hates being alone; I have heard her say so a million times.'

'But it was different then,' said Jenny, blushing deeply. 'Sybil is in trouble now; and besides, she is not well enough; she wouldn't care—'

'For the sympathy of friends in her trouble, and the attention of friends in her illness! Jenny, that's all wrong, and I don't believe it. There never was anyone who liked sympathy and attention more than Sybil; and if she is ill she needs them in a still greater degree, and to be taken care of and comforted and—'

'I know it and I try—I do try to take care of her and comfort her. I do all I can. Lion, why are you so hard on me? You don't understand,' cried poor Jenny, in great trouble. Lion turned on her quickly,

'I know you do; and I understand everything, you dear, brave, independent little girl,' he said, taking her hand in his big clasp and smiling reassuringly. 'My mother offended you.

I am not defending her—you had good cause for offence, and I told her so ; and Ada wrote your sister a silly angry letter, full of girlish rhodomontade for which she ought to have been whipped ; but, Jenny child, the best people do silly things sometimes—you and I too, for that matter ; and if we are not to forgive one another, if we are to go on bearing malice—'

'But it isn't malice,' said Jenny, piteously, her face still burning, and her big eyes brimming over with the loveliest look of shamed appeal. 'Ada was quite right in her letter. I should have said just the same, and been just as angry at the time ; but now—now, when mother is dead and poor Sybil so ill and sad, not even to ask after her or mention her name. Lion, it's no use their writing in this way. I had rather they did not write to me at all ; and I won't be separated from my sister. She never did anything wrong, except to you. You know she did not, and they ought to know it too. Oh ! if even you have heard what they say, how can you wonder at me ?'

'Dear Jenny, don't cry,' said Lion, soothingly. 'Don't, pray don't, or I shall be sorry I said anything to you. I shall be afraid to say anything more ; and I want to do so. It is necessary that I should, for Sybil's sake and your own. There, there, you needn't jerk your head—I know you don't care for yourself ; but Sybil cares for you. She would not like to see you injured any more than you would see her so, and if you are not to be separated for harm, then you must not be for good. My dear, harm is being done to you both by your present line of conduct ; and if I speak of it, it is not—God knows—for pleasure or intrusiveness, or even because I was your sister's lover once ; put that out of your head, please, altogether, but just as a parson with a parson's right to look after a couple of orphan girls, and still more as the friend your mother trusted to stand in the place of a brother to you. She wasn't afraid to do so. Need you be more prudish, Jenny ?'

'I am not—prudish,' said Jenny ; but the words came with difficulty, and it was well the way these two were taking led them along a quiet country lane, shut in by high hedges, for anyone seeing them might have thought it was a lovers' quarrel, to judge from the raised tones of Lion's voice and the tears which, despite all Jenny's efforts to restrain them, would trickle down her cheeks, and make wet stains on her black bonnet-strings. The curate at that moment felt dreadfully remorseful and compassionate ; but before coming out he had made up his mind to do his duty, and was not going to give in.

'I know you are not,' he said, cheerfully. 'You're a brave, true-hearted girl; but you aren't Solomon and the Book of Wisdom rolled together, so you mustn't try to be brave in the wrong direction, or take offence where none is meant.'

'I couldn't take offence with you, Lion.'

'That's right; then let us speak frankly, like man to man, or true man to true woman, which is better. These shameful slanders about your sister, which I'm ashamed to think should ever have reached your ears, you and I, and I hope plenty of others, know them to be nothing but foul, impudent lies. That's not enough, however. Everyone who has heard them, and they've been spread about pretty widely, must know the same. It is right that they should. A man can afford to meet attacks on his reputation with contemptuous silence. A woman can't. You know the old saying about "Cæsar's wife," and it's a true one. To talk about a girl at all does her harm, no matter whether the talk be true or false; and the very fact of her not being able to defend herself obliges others to be more careful for her protection. Now you must tell your sister—'

'Tell Sybil?' cried Jenny. The tears had left her paler than usual; but she flushed up brightly enough now, and her eyes sparkled. 'Do you suppose Sybil has ever heard a word of this? Why, it would have killed her. Thank you, Lion, I can take better care of her than that.'

'What! she doesn't even know of it? You have kept it all to yourself? Jenny, you are a brave girl. So much the better, however, for I hope we can manage to keep it from her still. The only wonder to me is that—there's a person whom it's not pleasant to me to speak of, child, but I must do it—that Mr Gareth Vane has not heard of these infamous rumours, and put a stop to them. Perhaps, however, he has not been down to Chadleigh End since you left it.'

The blush deepened on Jenny's face.

'I don't know. He doesn't—Lion, you must not think he comes here. Sybil has never seen him since mamma died, nor I either. She—I don't know that I ought to tell you, but I can't help it—she is not engaged to him any longer.'

There was a silence. Jenny had brought out her announcement with so much hesitation and embarrassment, and with such a fluttering of that secret hope of hers at her heart, that she dared not look at her companion, lest he should read it in her face, while he, on his side, turned as red as if someone had slapped him there, and looked straight in front of him at no-

where. When he did speak, it was with a rather too palpable effort at the coolness of an uninterested friend.

‘She is not. Well, that is nothing to anyone but herself, unless—did you tell her what I wrote you, that her mother had virtually given her consent before I left her that evening?’

‘Yes; but I think—of course I don’t know, and I can’t talk about it even to Sybil—but I think that, knowing he was really the cause of poor mamma’s death—oh, Lion, would it be natural for her to care for him in the same way afterwards—such a man too, as he was, anyhow?’

‘He was the man she loved,’ said Lion bitterly; then with a jerk of his head as if to dismiss the subject: ‘but that doesn’t matter now; and the only difference what you have told me makes is that it leaves others free to bestir themselves for her protection without infringing on his rights. He will have to do his part in any case. The thing now is to do ours. Jenny, was your sister out at all that evening?’

‘Yes, Lion, she was. Even the servants knew that. One could not help their doing so.’

‘And Mr Vane—’

‘She never saw him at all. He wrote and asked her to do so. I won’t say anything against him. They were engaged, and he had not seen her since mamma forbade him the house, but he wanted to see her about something of importance; so he said he would come down by the eight o’clock train that Thursday, and asked her to meet him by the station. I don’t think (in novels the good heroes and heroines do lots of worse things) that there was much harm in her doing so.’

‘I don’t think there was.’

‘And when the train arrived he was not in it. She could not see him, at any rate. She waited where he bade her for a little while. It was near the old gravel pit, and in gathering some flowers she leant over the edge of it and fell in. Fortunately, old Jowl the herb-seller passed by that way after a time, and helped her out; but it was dark by then, and raining hard, so he wouldn’t take her home till morning, and she had hurt her foot in falling too much to walk by herself.’

‘Then she positively never even saw Mr Vane!’

‘Never since the day he left Dyson’s farm. Oh, Lion, hasn’t it been sad altogether for her?’

‘Sadder even than you think. Poor girl! Poor Sybil! Jenny, has she any idea what time it was when the accident occurred?’

'Just before the up train came in, for she heard the whistle.'

'Half-past eight! And how long was it before this Jowl found her?'

'She said it seemed a lifetime; but it was only just ten when they got to his cottage; and he kept her there till five o'clock next morning. There, Lion, I have told you all about it, though I would not tell your mother; but you care for Sybil, you believe in her, so I don't mind; only take care that you never repeat a word of it, or she might be vexed with me. You know how vulgar people would laugh and make game of the idea of one of the Miss Dysarts going out to meet a—a lover, and his never coming. Poor Sybil! it makes her ill even now to think of that night; and we paid old Jowl to hold his tongue about it.'

'Then you did the most foolish thing two foolish girls could have done. What! pay a man to hide an innocent truth, and then run away yourselves, and leave scandal-mongers to invent a harmful lie in place of it! Look here, Jenny, so far from holding my tongue, I am going to tell what you have told me far and near.'

'Lion, you won't! Think of Sybil's feelings!'

'I do think of them and of what they would be if she knew— Why, child, what nonsense you are talking! You don't know half of what has been said, and there is no need you should; only you must leave me quite free, and just believe that I am doing what your own father would have done—or your brother, if you had had one.'

'Dear Lion, you are better than twenty brothers. Indeed, I trust you, only—'

'Only you don't! That doesn't matter in the least; for I give you a fair warning, I am going to write to Mr Vane and let him know that he had better come forward and say where he was on that evening; and to see old Jowl, who has played you as false as the ancient villain dared; and then—then I think I shall go to Mrs De Boonyen (I find she is the principal scandal-monger in this instance), and request that she will take the trouble to retract all she has been saying with the least possible delay. And now, Jenny, here's the end of the lane; so good-bye, I won't take you any farther—and mind, Sybil is not to hear a word of any of this. Promise!'

'Not till she has earned the right to hear it by loving you for your own sake again,' said Jenny to herself as she retraced

her homeward way alone. 'And I think—I think, even from what she now knows, she must have begun to do so already. How could she help it? Oh dear! I wonder what fatherless girls do who haven't Lion Ashleighs to help them!'

The sun was setting in a lake of saffron flame. Long feathery clouds, orange-coloured and fringed with rose, floated high in a windy pale-blue sky. Already the evenings were getting chilly, and the alders in the hedges were turning to purple, the willows by the grey quivering pool in the hollow, to faint yellow. Autumn was setting in; but for the moment the sunset glow, which hung over everything, irradiated the whole face of nature and was reflected in Jenny's heart.

Despite all that had happened, ay, even with the tear-stains undried upon her cheek, she could not say she had had an unhappy birthday.

CHAPTER V.

A BUNDLE OF NEWS.

'TELL where Mr Vane was the evening of that there dreadful thunderstorm in July, when three men was killed by lightning in a barge on the river, an' a tree on the Embankment was split in two 'alves? In course she could, an' easy, seein' as how it was only the day but one afore 'e left 'er, an' he were at home all the evenin'. The 'ole of it? Yes, sir, the 'ole of it. Dined at 's club he did, as customary, or so she believed; but come 'ome quite early about nine with another gent, a Mr Martin, complainin' of 'eadache from the thunder in the hair, an' astin' for a cup o' your strongest tea, Mrs Brooker, which well he knew was to be depended on, for no waterin' o' lodgers' teapots in 'er 'ouse if she knowed it, nor no such low tricks of any sort, as she would despise 'em an' never permitted fur a minnit. Did he go out again? No, he didn't; nor no one else dropped in. It was rainin' that 'ard when t'other gent went as you wouldn't ha' turned a cat out if you could 'elp it; an' Lizzie—that's the gurl there—had grumbled orful at bein' sent for a 'ansom. Not that *she* need make a fuss though, as was left on the workus doorstep when a babby on the rainiest night of the year, as you can ast the matron; an' Mr Vane a-givin' 'er a shillin' too for 'er trouble; but they gurls al'ays will 'ave their growl—*Thank* you kindly, I'm sure, sir. Only too

glad to be of use to any gentleman of the ministry, as is certing to 'ave a good end in their questionings.'

So Mrs Brooker, landlady of No. —, Bacon Chambers, as she chose to call the lodgings she let to single gentlemen in Arundel Street; and if ever a couple of halfcrowns were as willingly given as received, it was those two bestowed by the curate in exchange for the information which satisfactorily proved that, so far from having been at Chadleigh End on the evening of that luckless Thursday, Gareth had passed it in his own rooms, and, after his friend left, alone.

Lion felt as if he had gained a victory.

It had not been won without some trouble however. He had written to Gareth Vane a very brief note, informing him that, as he had not been at Chadleigh End for some time, he was probably unaware that a scandal seriously affecting his own honour and that of another person was being spread about by parties inimical to him; and that, to silence it, it would be necessary for him to come forward and prove where and in what company he was on the evening of Thursday, the twenty-second of July.

To this note the curate had no answer whatever.

He waited a week, and then, deciding that Gareth must have moved his lodgings, and remembering that he had mentioned the name of his club on the evening that he had dined at the vicarage, he addressed a postcard to him at the latter establishment, marked 'Urgent,' and merely saying that an important letter had been sent to him at his old address, and was waiting for an answer.

To this he got a postcard in return from the club porter.

Mr Vane had left England for a yachting tour in the North, and was not expected back for two or three weeks. Any letters for him might be sent to the club, where he forwarded his address when he wanted them sent on to him.

Lion couldn't leave his work that day, as it was Saturday, and he had his sermon to prepare; but on Monday morning he put himself in the train and went up to London. His first visit was to the club, and there he had no difficulty. Gareth Vane was evidently a regular *habitué* of the place, one whose habits were well known, and who had no desire for concealing them; and the fact of the Thursday night in question having been both the last but one of his stay in London and the date of a noted thunderstorm, made it easier for people to remember what they had seen of him.

He had dined there? Yes, certainly, and for the last time, though he had looked in on Saturday to give orders about his letters, etc. What time was dinner? Seven punctual, and there was a Mr Martin, also a member of the club, dined with him. They went out about a quarter to eight. Mr Martin was in a hurry, having orders for one of the theatres lying on the table by him; but waiter remembered hearing Mr Vane say he had such a confounded headache he didn't feel fit for it. What was Mr Martin's address? Didn't know, and hadn't authority to give it if he did; but—thank you, sir; *much* obliged, I'm sure—thought it most likely he would come in to dinner to-night, as there was a new piece on at the Imperial, and he always dined at the club on first nights. Waiter thought he did some of the 'critikising' for the papers, though he looked young for it; but they did employ very young gents for that now, perhaps till they was fit to do something out of their own 'eads. Would the gentleman like to leave his card for him? And, after a moment's hesitation, Lionel did, adding that he would call again about dinner time.

He did so, and found Mr Martin eating his meal rapidly, as though fearing that the interview would be likely to delay him in his pursuit of the drama as viewed from the critic's stall. Not quite so communicative, this gentlemen, inclined to look shyly at the Roman collar and felt hat of his visitor, and to be very reserved and suspicious lest some 'parson's trap' should be in process of laying for him; but Lion's natural frankness and *bonhomie* soon disarmed him, and when he found that the parson was an acquaintance of that 'gay dog, Vane's,' and wanted only to serve the latter by quashing an ugly falsehood which had been spread about him in his absence, Mr Martin's scruples gave way, and he condescended to give the very slight information required from him, namely, that he and Mr Vane had gone to the theatre on the evening in question, that the latter had abused the piece and complained of headache; and that, therefore, as it was not a 'first night, and he was only there in an unprofessional character'—(*N.B.*—Mr Martin *was* young. He was twenty-three, and very raw; therefore to be excused this parenthesis and the accent in which it was delivered)—they had adjourned to Vane's rooms, where he stayed for an hour or so, and then went home. Hadn't seen or heard from his friend since; but knew he was yachting somewhere, and someone had said he was going to be married to a rich widow. Didn't believe that, however, Vane not at all a

marrying man ; too fond of his liberty by half, and too fond of pretty little girls' photographs on his mantelpiece. Here note, that your people who begin by being extra reserved not unfrequently end by becoming superfluously garrulous. Lion was ungrateful enough to get rather impatient of young Martin's confidences before a break in the latter enabled him to express his thanks for the information accorded, and then to take leave and hurry off to Bacon Chambers. How he fared there we have seen.

'The best day's work I've done for years,' he said to himself as he put himself in the train again for Chadleigh End. 'May to-morrow be as lucky with my friends Jowl and De Boonyen ! To silence their tongues is a duty which must be done at any sacrifice of time and annoyance.'

But before doing that or performing another duty, hardly perhaps sacrificial, but still more to his mind—that, namely, of going over to Dilworth to triumph over his mother with the proof of Sybil Dysart's truth and innocence—he heard something of the De Boonyens which almost took his breath away, and showed him that their tongues, at any rate, must have ample occupation just then on their own affairs without transgressing over other people's. A note was waiting for him from the Rev. Mr Beale when he returned from London, and it requested that gentleman's 'dear friend Ashleigh' to publish the banns of marriage on the Sunday next ensuing, and the two following ones, between Timothy Beale, widower, of 2, Alpha Cottages, Epsom, and Horatia Maude de Boonyen, spinster, of Hapsburg Hall, in the parish of Chadleigh End.

Of a certainty, Lionel carried a budget of news with him when he set off for the Rectory.

He found Mrs Ashleigh, however, full of the Beale and De Boonyen subject already, and in so merry a mood over it, that he was fain to let her have it out before even commencing on his own special errand, as to which, indeed, she seemed so provokingly indifferent that he got almost angry.

'I did not know you were so intimate with these people,' he said. 'Is it true, then? I took it for a mild outbreak of insanity on old Beale's part. *He* marry that ugly little Horatia Maude? Why, he has barely twopence-halfpenny a-year to keep himself and his children on. What are they thinking of?'

'Of what people in love generally think, I suppose,' said his mother. '"Old" Beale (Fie on the arrogance of you very young men ! You will be calling me old next) is barely forty, and little Horatia Maude is four-and-twenty, and she has been

in love with him any time during the last three years. It was a perambulator that brought her passion to the surface. About a month ago she met him out walking with the five rough-headed little Beales, and wheeling the youngest, the club-footed one, in a perambulator. It was too much for Horatia Maude. She might have withstood the rough heads of the elder ones, but that domestic machine propelled by the reverend hands of Mr Beale was too much for her. The secret broke forth beneath its wheels. In the worthy gentleman's own words, he could not help seeing that she cared for him ; and as he had "always had a special esteem and regard for the chastened amiability of her character," it occurred to him that Providence might have intended its late pecuniary blessings as means to a higher and life-long happiness both for himself and Miss De Boonyen.'

'Pecuniary blessings ! What on earth did he mean ? I never heard of poor Beale being troubled with them.'

'A friend has lately given him a nomination to Christ's Hospital for his eldest boy, and promised the same to the second when he is old enough. That will take two off his hands for some years, and the poor man felt quite rich in consequence. He and Horatia Maude clasped hands over the perambulator on the strength of it. My dear Lion, I shall certainly make her a present of one when—she requires such an article.'

'I shall give her my blessing. Bravo, little Horatia ! I didn't know there was so much good stuff in her. But how on earth did they coax the old people to consent ?'

'They did not try to coax anyone at all. The De Boonyens were half mad when they heard of it, which was by the lovers walking into old De Boonyen's study, and announcing that they were going to get married, and would be obliged by his blessing, etc. But what could they do ? Mrs De B. ranted and shrieked at her daughter ; Mr De B. bullied and threatened the lover ; but Horatia was of age, she had a thousand pounds of her own, which her father (so like him !) had given her as a birthday present the day she became twenty-one, and which, of course, she had never spent ; and she declared that, so far from going against her parents in her choice, she had fully believed it would be the very thing to please her mother, who had constantly told her that a clergyman's wife would be the happiest position for her, had made her read theological books, and ask Mr Ashleigh questions about them, and had even told

her once that she might encourage any attentions from him without fear of being rebuked by her parents, as, though he was only a curate, and not rich, there were higher considerations than money, which she might trust them for her sake to appreciate.'

Lionel roared with laughter.

"Higher considerations!" That means family. Ah, we all know how high you hold yourself, Mrs mother, and what Mrs De Boonyen thinks of position. Poor Horatia doesn't seem to have understood her mother's little views. But what about Beale?"

'He was more impracticable still; rather seemed to think that he was rewarding Horatia's devotion than, as Mr De Boonyen put it, "presuming on her idiocy," and calmly told both parents that he had only done so after much thought and prayer, both for the maiden, his children, and himself, and after having made himself assured that the sinfully senseless pomps and luxuries in which Horatia had been brought up were as offensive to her nature as his own, and that her happiness would really lie in the pure and holy poverty of a Christian minister's wife. Old De Boonyen thought this was all humbug, of course, and tried to frighten him by threatening never to give his daughter a brass farthing if she married him, on which Mr Beale offered him his hand, saying that was exactly what he wished to stipulate for, that he disapproved *in toto* of women having money at all, and that, though he would not insist on Horatia Maude's renouncing her thousand pounds, he trusted that when once his wife, she would look on it merely as a means afforded her by Providence for doing good to her poorer neighbours; and for herself would be content, like his late and lamented wife, to rely on what he could do for her.'

"Can you put on her boots and do her 'air?" said old De Boonyen, in his brutal way. "She's never done either in her life that I know of, and I don't suppose you can afford to take her French maid along with her."

"I certainly would not if I could," said Mr Beale, "since I consider that every woman ought to be able and willing to perform such offices for herself. Should she be at any time sick or enfeebled, however, which God forbid, I trust that she will find that her husband's more sacred duties will not prevent him from doing any service for her that a maid could render; ay, and more tenderly."

'My dear Lion, what was the good of saying anything to a

man like that? There was no end of fuss and quarrelling, and disagreeableness, of course; but Horatia vowed that she would rather be Mr Beale's servant than any other man's wife, and that if he were sent away she would go into a convent; and wept such torrents of tears over every insult to him, that at last her father was moved. He's not altogether a bad old man, you know. His wife has taken great pains with him, but the natural "bunion" still shows through the very thin boot of adventitious grandeur, and responds to—ahem!—to pressure; and Horatia's appeals to what he had often called his happy days in the homely poverty of his early life moved him. The next person to conquer was Mrs De Boonyen, and as she was far more unapproachable, I was called in. Mr Beale called here and told me the whole story in confidence (I've heard it from each side), and, at Horatia's request, I put on my grandest gown and manner, and drove to Hapsburg Hall to pay her mamma a visit, in the course of which I took care to congratulate her on the news I had heard of her daughter's engagement to our esteemed friend Mr Beale.'

'You did? You bold woman! Did she tell you you were quite mistaken, and ring the bell for you to be shown out?'

'Not at all. She tried to do the former, but I was too clever for her; and she had said too much to me on the unseemliness of family quarrels (as instanced by the Dysart scandal) and the disgrace of rebellious daughters (as instanced by Sybil Dysart in contrast to her own docile and well-brought-up children) to care to own that they and herself were now in the same boat. Besides, I gave her no chance to do so, for I not only assumed that the match had her consent, but that it was of her making, and paid her the prettiest and most cordial compliments on it; spoke of Mr Beale's nobility of character and position as a clergyman, and of the esteem in which we all held him, in the most eulogistic terms; hoped that I might never have more anxiety about my son than she would have about her son-in-law; told her laughingly I quite saw now what certain hints she had given me as to her preference for the clergy and her contempt of mere mercenary matches for her daughters meant; and that I heartily respected her for her wisdom on the subject (my dear Lion, that *did* cut: I saw the poor wonian positively writhe, but how could she say, "I never meant him at all; it was your son I was spelling for by all those fine phrases?" She had cut the ground from under her own feet); and I finished by asking if dear Horatia would not come in and give

me a kiss in earnest of the friendship which must in future exist between us as wives of men in the same profession and united by the same interests. It was too much altogether for poor Mrs De Boonyen. She knew her husband had tacitly given in already, and I suppose she thought it would be more for her dignity to do the same. She sent for Horatia without a word, and if ever an ugly little face expressed abject gratitude, that girl's did for me when I kissed and congratulated her, and then turned to her mother and asked when the lovers would come and dine with me.'

'You are the queen of diplomats ; and I should think they were grateful to you. I can imagine you quite well with that imposing, suave and affable manner of yours well on, and laughing in your sleeve all the time. Do you laugh at everyone, I wonder ? And so the marriage is to be at once ?'

'In a month, yes. That is quite sudden, and a separate piece of news. Mr Beale was offered a living in Dorsetshire the day before yesterday, on condition that he could enter on residence by the second week in October. He went straight to the Hall and pleaded for an early marriage, that he might take his wife with him ; and, as things are not very pleasant for Horatia at home since her victory, nor her lover very welcome there, it was thought better on all sides to agree.'

'I'm very glad of it, and I wish old Beale joy. Wish me joy too, mother. I've listened to your story very patiently, though I've been longing all the time to tell you one which ought to be a thousand times more interesting to us. Don't you want to hear the result of my inquiries into the mystery of that Thursday night ?'

'That—what night ?' said Mrs Ashleigh, opening her eyes. She knew perfectly well ; but she had seen Lionel was getting impatient, and impatience was a vice she never pandered to. Lionel, however, was too straightforward not to take her *au sérieux*.

'What night !' he repeated, almost angrily. 'Why, the night poor Sybil spent in old Jowl's hut. Mother, I have sifted the whole story, and if ever an innocent girl was vilified, she has been in this.' And then he dashed off into an eager narration of all he had found out, marching up and down the room in front of his mother the while, as if to work off in movement the triumph which shone in every line of his honest face.

'So she never saw that Vane at all, either on the evening in question or afterwards, for we have Jenny's word for the latter,'

he concluded, pausing at last in his walk to face his mother with shining eyes. ‘And the foulest slander that ever was invented is proved to be as false and worthless as its promoters. The wonder to me is how they dared—but there! if some, even among ourselves, could listen to them, one can’t wonder at anything. Mother, when are you going to see Sybil and Jenny now?’

Mrs Ashleigh looked up with the same calmly open eyes. Lion might excite himself and prance about her drawing-room as much as he pleased, but it only made his mother assume a more placid aspect, and devote herself with keener interest to the piece of crewel-work in her hands.

‘To see “them,” dear—the Dysart girls?’ she said, with the slightest little quizzical smile about her mouth. ‘Why, really—’

‘Yes, the Dysart girls!’ cried Lion. Her manner had damped his spirits considerably, but he tried not to show it. ‘You *will* go to see them now, surely? You’re too just not to do so; and I think you’re too just not to beg Sybil’s pardon into the bargain.’

‘I think it is Sybil’s part to beg mine; and I believe she agrees with me,’ said Mrs Ashleigh. ‘At any rate I have had the pleasure (don’t you think that dull green looks better against the blue, so?) of giving it to her; and I am glad now to have done so, since it seems very clear to me from your story (my scissors, please) that this man has deserted her in her turn. Poor child! that accounts still more clearly for the heart-break in her eyes. And yet she doesn’t even pretend not to care for him as much as ever.’

‘She— Why, mother, what do you mean?’ cried Lion, starting. ‘Have you seen her, then? Have you *been* there?’

His mother smiled at him with bland superiority.

‘You have not been corresponding with Jenny of late, I see,’ she said, calmly. ‘Certainly I have been there. Your father and I went together yesterday, and—let me see—I was there five days ago as well. Jenny sent her love to you, by-the-bye; but as I have not seen you since I have not been able to deliver it.’

‘Five days ago!’ repeated Lion, disregarding the rest. ‘Why, that was the day after I wrote to you telling you—’

‘Telling me Jenny’s history of her sister’s doings. Exactly!’ said Mrs Ashleigh, nodding. ‘I don’t wonder you are surprised. It was very improper of Jenny to put confidence in young men which she refused to their elderly mothers; and I told her so.

As, however, she was gracious enough to forgive me for giving her cause for the refusal, I was obliged in courtesy to return the compliment— 'Why, Lion ! Lion ! what are you doing to me ?'

For Lion had suddenly clapped his hands on her shoulders, and was giving her a combined hug and shake, thoroughly 'leonine' in character ; but which might have been deleterious to women less firmly built than handsome, upright Mrs Ashleigh. It did send her crewel-work flying on to the floor.

'Mother' he said, heartily, 'you're the greatest brick in the universe, and I'm the biggest owl. As if *you* would have waited for proofs ! I might have known you better. Why didn't you box my ears ?'

'Probably to save myself from absolute extermination. I've come rather near it as it is ; but I own I don't deserve to be ordered about as if I was Mrs De Boonyen or Jowl himself,' said Mrs Ashleigh, laughing, though her mouth was rather unsteady. The next moment she broke down altogether, and covered her eyes with her hand.

'My dear,' she said, brokenly, 'I shall never forgive myself for not having gone there sooner. Poor little Sybil ! Poor child ! Lion, I am glad of what you told me, about your feelings towards her the other day, for it enables me to speak more frankly to you now. I could not do so to Jenny, with those big eyes of hers fixed on her sister as though her own life depended on her, and yet unable to see—'

'See what ?' asked Lion. He felt sobered, awe-struck, and a little frightened, and the joyous colour had faded out of his face.

Mrs Ashleigh drew it nearer to her own and kissed it as if he were still a child.

'Do you know that I hardly knew her ?' she said. 'Jenny was out, gone to the chemist's for something ; and when she lifted her poor little face from the pillow—Lion, my dear, I think that girl is dying, and that she knows it. Poor Jenny ! What will she do when she has to know it too ?'

There was no answer. Lion had turned away, and for a few minutes there was absolute silence in the room, he trying to fight down the suffocating feeling which had risen in his throat at the sound of his mother's words : she watching him anxiously through her tears and wishing she had not spoken. Had he deceived himself as to his feelings after all ? He had said that his love for Sybil Dysart was dead, that he could never care for her again as he had done ; but what save love would have

toiled so ardently to clear her name? And now that he had succeeded, now—

‘Mother,’ he said, facing round on her suddenly, his face quite haggard and colourless, his eyes, so shining a moment back, dim and contracted, ‘what makes you say that? Is it because she looks ill? But she has been ailing some time. Jenny said so. It mayn’t be anything serious. Perhaps her altered manner made you—’

‘Her altered manner?’ interrupted Mrs Ashleigh, smiling sadly. ‘There was no alteration there. Sybil isn’t a bit like Jenny. She doesn’t know what pride or resentment means. When I came into the room she started up, blushing like a child that has been naughty and hid itself, and said, “Mrs. Ashleigh!” I said, “Yes, my dear; I have come to see and make friends again. Will you forgive me for being so hard?” and she just threw her wasted arms round my neck, clinging to me, and putting up her mouth to be kissed as if I had been her mother. Then that dreadful cough came on, and when Jenny returned about ten minutes later, she first glared at me as if I was murdering her sister, and then flew to Sybil, took her in her arms, and looking at me over her head, said, “Mrs Ashleigh, you have not been telling *her* of those falsehoods?” Poor Sybil said, “What falsehoods, Jenny?” and I suppose that answered her, for the child’s face flushed up and quivered all over; but even then I don’t think she would have let me kiss her if I hadn’t first told her that I believed now all she said to me on the day we parted. After that, of course, we did as women usually do—cried, and made fools of ourselves mutually; but Sybil—Lion, anyone would have cried over her. It was like looking at her ghost.’

‘Has she no doctor?’ said Lion, in a choked voice. ‘Surely he would know—’

‘Some second-rate practitioner at Esher. He pooh-poohed it at first, the landlady told me; but just of late even he seems to have got frightened, and has been coming every other day. Sybil complained of it. She said they couldn’t afford constant five shillings now for nothing, and she should get well just as soon without him.’

‘She ought to have the very best advice there is.’

‘So I think; but it is a little difficult, for both are proud on the subject of money, and from us in particular. Lion, I’ll tell you what: couldn’t we get Dr Hamilton to see her? You know the man I mean—the one who is so great on chest and

throat cases, consulting physician at St Barnard's Hospital. Your aunt Margaret sent for him once. He lives at Surbiton, close by the girls.'

But Lion did not hear her. He had sat down and buried his face in his hands. Sybil dying—*dying!* His one love, his, so short a time ago ; and but now they two had been laughing and joking. It could not be true.

CHAPTER VI.

'AND NATHAN SAID UNTO DAVID, THOU ART THE MAN.'

SUDDEN marriages seemed in vogue this summer.

About this time Mrs Hamilton received a letter and newspaper containing the news of one which disturbed her greatly ; though not so much on account of the intelligence conveyed in it, as of the manner in which it had been carried out.

'If there were any cause for such haste it would be different,' she said ; 'but where there is none, I call it absolutely indecent.'

'Well, if he were going to do such a thing at all, it seems to me he might have done it more hastily still,' said the doctor ; 'shortly after her husband's death, for instance, when most people thought he intended it. I had fancied that the delay in his case meant safety.'

'Some married people pay a certain respect to the memory of their husbands or wives, even if they don't to their living presence,' retorted Mrs Hamilton, in her severest tones. 'I trust, for Isabelle's own sake, that she was answerable for the delay then ; but that does not in the least excuse the indelicacy of the present proceedings. I am astonished at them both.'

'If you expect delicacy from Mrs Beverley, Helen, I'm afraid she'll astonish you pretty often,' said the doctor. 'A wonderfully handsome woman in her way ; but looks—'

'Oh ! spare me a dissertation on her looks, pray. They are nothing to me, whatever they may be to you.'

'Which is less than nothing, a great deal. I am pitying your brother.'

You needn't do so. I hope my brother is better able to take care of himself than his poor sister was, poor thing ! One would think you were jealous of him, however, by your bitterness against Isabelle. Has she ever slighted you ?'

The doctor made no answer beyond a somewhat scornful smile, but pushed aside his coffee-cup with an impatient gesture, and left the room. One of the children was on the lawn as he crossed it a moment later, and called after him, 'Papa!' but he merely waved his hand and walked on. He did not even look back.

'Papa is cross too, this morning,' the little one said; and Mrs Hamilton, sitting at the breakfast-table near the open window, heard her, and coloured faintly, while a look of pain rose to her face. It passed away in a moment, however, and taking up the fortnight-old newspaper, which lay beside her plate, she turned once again to the brief paragraph, which, for the moment was more interesting to her than anything else.

'At Christiania, by the Rev. Edward Peak, Chaplain of H.M.S. Britomart, Gareth Vane, only son of the late Matthew Vane, of Marston House, Brighton, to Isabelle Annie Beverley, relict of the late Thomas Beverley, R.E., of Gresham Gardens, Kensington. No cards.'

'No, and no notice beforehand, no good wishes asked or given by anyone, no letter even to me till it has been a fortnight over,' said Mrs Hamilton bitterly. 'What can he be about to act in such a way? I have not deserved it from him.'

The tears rose to her eyes with the thought. Hard as she was to her husband, hard as most people found her generally, she was sincerely fond of this scapegrace brother; and neglect from his hands wounded her to the quick. She forgot for the moment in what manner she had received the news of his last engagement; but even if she had remembered it, she would have thought that this more recent one might have blotted it from his memory. Whoever, or whatever, this Sybil Dysart was, he could never have really loved her, or he would not have forgotten her so soon; while Belle he had always liked. Belle was rich, and, with all her faults, adored him. She would set him up, enable him to pay his debts and begin life afresh. It was a wise enough marriage in that respect. Still he might have written to her beforehand; and the tears were still in her eyes at his neglect when she rose from the breakfast-table.

Perhaps there was more cause than one for this weakness.

Of late her constant repression of anything like familiarity or playfulness between the children and their father seemed to have succeeded in bringing about the effect which might have been expected. Dr Hamilton had ceased to struggle against her jealous control over their affections. So far as she could see, indeed, he took little notice of them at present, answered

them briefly when they spoke to him, and never lingered at the schoolroom door to fling them a pleasant word or smile on his way up and down stairs, as he had been wont to do at the nursery one in earlier days. She had robbed them of his love. Had she a right to do so? Nor was this all, he was far less at home now than before, dined out oftener when his work was over, spoke more rarely, and met the ungracious rejoinders which too often awaited him with less patience and gentleness than he had been used to show.

Not that he ever answered his wife rudely, or was quarrelsome in his turn; but even the abrupt leaving her when attacked, the cool smile or scornful shrug of the shoulders, were new things in Mrs Hamilton's experience; and coming from a man as amiable and courteous by nature as the doctor, marked the gradual ripening of a change which startled her more than such a natural outcome of her persistent coldness might have seemed likely to do.'

Hitherto he had always appeared willing to be affectionate, if she would let him, ready to make advances if they would be responded to; but now (of a sudden, as it seemed to her, for one does not grasp the slow growth of a change of this sort) even this was altered, and he appeared as coldly indifferent as herself, and as satisfied to maintain the position which it had been her choice to bring about.

Her *choice*! Nay, rather her sorrow, the mission which he himself had imposed on her. What was she in all this but the passive instrument of a just retribution, and an instrument which for every pang it inflicted, suffered an answering one tenfold more keen within itself!

Nor was Gareth's letter, when she came to read it over later in the day, any comfort to her. It was short, somewhat cold, and breathing a spirit of self-bitterness and reckless mockery, strangely unlike the usual tone of a newly-married man, in all the proud enjoyment of the first weeks of his honeymoon; and rousing a vague pain and fear in her, lest even with him she should have acted mistakenly. It gave no details or explanations of his suddenly made-up marriage whatsoever; merely said he supposed she had been prepared for the news, and trusted that as she had always been so anxious to see him in properly gilt fetters, she was satisfied at last. Anyhow if she was not, it was done and there was no remedy for it. The yachting trip had been very jolly in the beginning, and had ended, like most jolly things, in no end of rows and unpleas-
antness. In fact, he himself had been on the eve of a duel

with Trembolini, and had only avoided the necessity, and proved his right to protect their mutual hostess, by marrying her. As for the Vanderbilts, they had behaved disgracefully ; so if on their return they spread any lying stories about the affair, Helen needn't believe them ; and for his part he never meant Belle to speak to one of the lot again. He hoped Helen would come and see them as soon as they returned ; but didn't know when that would be. London in the dead season was always beastly, and he would rather stay away till people had done gossiping about him.

'Then why give them cause for gossip by acting in such a hasty, indecorous fashion ?' Mrs Hamilton thought indignantly. 'And what does he mean by "lying stories" ? It is very unpleasant altogether. I wish now he hadn't gone with them, and yet I thought it would be for his good, and—'

She was interrupted by a message. The page came in to say there was a gentleman—a clergyman—downstairs in master's study. He had seemed much disappointed at hearing that the doctor was out, and wanted to know when he would be in. Could the mistress tell him ?

'Certainly not. Say he is out on his afternoon round, and that his return is quite uncertain,' said Mrs Hamilton, and went on with her answer to Gareth's letter.

In a minute, however, she was again interrupted.

'The gentleman gave me this card for you, madam, and says, would it be taking a liberty if he asked to speak to you for a moment ? He can wait a few minutes if you are busy ; but he would like to leave a message with you in case he missed seeing the doctor.'

'Could he not write it, I wonder ?' But though Mrs Hamilton said the words it was under her breath ; and she added almost in the same moment, 'Ask him to sit down, and I will be with him in a minute or two.'

It was more than a minute or two, however, before she kept her word. She wanted to finish the letter before the post went out, and brief as she intended it to be—a mere message disclaiming any wish to offer an opinion on a matter which had been arranged and completed before even she was informed of it—the wording took some thought, and in the middle of it the governess came in with a complaint about one of the children, which required attention. It was only while speaking to her that Mrs Hamilton's eyes fell on the card which the page had left, and read there—

REV. LIONEL ASHLEIGH,
The Vicarage, Chadleigh End.

The words made her start. 'Chadleigh End—Chadleigh End!' she repeated to herself. 'Where have I heard that name? It is a village near Epsom; but I don't know anyone there. Stay! I know; it was the place where that girl came from—Sybil Dysart. She lives there. Can this man have anything to tell me about her?' The thought was sufficient to flurry her. She put away letter and governess without further delay, and went downstairs to the study.

Lionel in the meantime had been awaiting her coming with some impatience. After all, his triumph had been a very short-lived one. He had cleared Sybil's name with the scandal-mongers, who had taken such pleasure in besmirching it; but of what avail was fair name to her, or anything else appertaining to this little world, if she were dying. And his mother said so: his mother, who was not a sentimental woman given to fancies and exaggerations, like so many of her sex. Was it likely she should be mistaken? He could not be content with accepting her opinion, however, nor was Mrs Ashleigh herself willing to rest on it. She took the trouble to go into Esher to see the doctor who was attending Sybil, and the interview rather confirmed than alleviated her fears.

He was only a small third-rate practitioner, a very worthy man, doubtless, but whose experience was of the most limited order, and one of those who, from pooh-poohing a case altogether, jumped to utterly despairing of it; and it must be remembered he knew nothing of Sybil's actual constitution or ordinary health. His acquaintance with her began when she was just recovering from a very sharp attack of a dangerous illness; and he put down all her suffering and weakness partly to the same score, and partly to the idea of her being naturally a sickly, consumptive girl. When he found how utterly horrified Mrs Ashleigh was at the change which had taken place in her appearance, and learnt that, so far from Miss Dysart having been always the languid, feeble creature he imagined, she had hardly known a day's sickness till the illness afore mentioned, and that her father, from having been equally healthy and robust in appearance, had died early in life of rapid consumption in the same manner, he went to the opposite extreme; and from being content to look in once a week or so on his gentle young patient, with a 'How are we to-day?' and the prescription of a little soothing draught or poultice, was ready

to order her coffin at once, and feel quite sure that he felt it was a hopeless case from the beginning.

On such a man, of course, no dependence could be placed; and Mrs Ashleigh had the less scruple in suggesting the advisability of consulting Dr Hamilton. Some delicacy of management, however, was needed in the matter. The little doctor was not fond of the big one, who had, as it appeared, snubbed him on some occasion, and he was not, therefore, likely to throw much sympathy into her plans for bringing him on the scene. On the other hand, Mrs Ashleigh felt sure that the expenses of the little household at Mrs Matherson's would not admit of any extra outlay; and knowing at once how proud and how ignorant in all these things the orphan girls were, she particularly wished the physician's visit to be no expense to them, but to have the air of coming at his brother practitioner's invitation. To do this it would be necessary to see Dr Hamilton, take him into the secret, and enlist his sympathies for the sick girl, by telling him more of the particulars of the case than she would have cared to enlarge upon with the common-place little man who had hitherto had the care of it; and it was finally decided that Lionel should ride over to Surbiton for this purpose.

It was a disappointment, therefore, to Lionel to find the great man out; and not being willing to go away without seeing him, or to incur the further delay of making an appointment, he determined to ask for the doctor's wife; and, if she should seem a nice motherly woman, to tell the story to her in the first instance.

Mrs Hamilton delayed her appearance, however, and to while away the time, he had just begun to glance about him at the different objects of art and virtu in which the room abounded, when his attention was suddenly caught and riveted.

It was a dull afternoon, and the light in the room was still further obscured by the venetians being partially closed in that tantalising manner which throws a strip of bright light on one corner of an apartment, making the rest look darker by comparison.

On the present occasion this streak of light chanced to fall on a picture hanging in a recess where ordinarily it might have escaped attention altogether; but as Lionel's eyes involuntarily wandered to it he started, uttered an exclamation, and springing to his feet crossed the room that he might examine it more nearly.

He had come to see this strange doctor about Sybil Dysart. Was that Sybil's own portrait hanging on the wall, and smiling at him with all the sweetness of her old guileless serenity? No, hardly that; and yet the resemblance was a marvellous one. He could not take his eyes off it, and was just drawing back to try the effect of viewing it from a little distance, when a step on the carpet showed him that he was not alone, and turning, he found himself face to face with a tall, distinguished-looking man, whose air and appearance showed him to be the owner of the study; though there was rather more surprise and annoyance in the way in which he looked at his visitor than could have been accounted for by the very natural occupation in which he found the latter engaged. It was sufficiently apparent to force an apology from Lionel.

'Dr Hamilton, I presume?' he said, coming forward in the frank gentlemanly manner natural to him. 'I really beg your pardon; but I was so occupied in admiring one of your pictures that I did not hear you come in. It is by Leslie, I see. Is it a portrait?'

'Certainly not,' said the doctor decidedly. 'I bought it as a fancy sketch at Agnew's, and because I liked the colouring and expression. What makes you think it a portrait?'

'Because it—the expression and colouring in particular—are so exactly like a person I know, that at first sight I almost thought it must have been painted from her. The odd thing is that I should find it here.'

'Indeed? Chance likenesses are common enough things,' said the doctor blandly. 'Why should there be any special oddness in them here?'

'Because the lady that picture resembles is the very person about whom I called to see you to-day, and in whose case I hope to interest you, Dr Hamilton. Can you spare me ten minutes? I have come over from Chadleigh End at the request of my mother, to speak to you about a young lady, who, we fear, is in a very critical state, though I, at any rate, hope you may be able to save her.'

'From Chadleigh End?' said the doctor. A very slight shiver had passed over his eyebrows; and he seemed to draw himself together with the air of a man bracing himself to meet some possible strain; but his manner became more courteous than before.

'Pray sit down,' he said, seating himself and waving Lion to an arm-chair near him. 'I can give you as much time as you

like. My round is over early to-day. Who is this young person you are speaking of? You are a clergyman, I see. Some parishioner of yours?

'Not at present,' said Lionel. 'She did live in my parish till within the last three months; both she and her sister—they are orphans—since when they have moved to a cottage on this side of Esher Common. The name is Dysart. Why! what is the matter? Are you unwell, sir?'

'Not in the least, thank you,' said the doctor. He had started slightly, and put out his hand as if in pain. 'Pray go on. Are you comfortable there? I wish you would take the arm-chair.' For Lion had disregarded his offer in that direction, and had thrown himself into the seat nearest to him—one with its back against the window. Look at him as closely as he might the doctor failed in the dim light to distinguish much more of his appearance than that he was a broad-shouldered, muscular-looking man, with well-shaped, sun-burnt hands, innocent of the poppery of gloves, and a sharp furrow between his brows which gave him the air of being much older than he was. Lionel, careless of his host's scrutiny, on his part, told his story simply enough. He had seen at the first glance that Dr Hamilton was a gentleman, and knew, from common report, that he was a man of sufficient sympathy and refinement to be safely trusted with such portions of the mental history of his patients as might bear on their physical health; but briefly as he tried to put the facts, they were sufficiently pathetic in themselves to touch even a stranger; and Dr Hamilton listened to them with a marked interest, not to say emotion, which the speaker's manifest feelings on the subject perhaps intensified. He did not interrupt him by a word until the curate had concluded, and then he said, in tones too grave for mere outward sympathy.—

'A sad story, indeed; and I see you feel the sadness in a way which does you honour, if you only know this young lady as her parish priest. Perhaps, however, she is a friend of yours as well?'

'A very old one. I have known her since she was a child; and a sweeter, happier girl till the last three months never made the sunshine of her home.'

'You say so? Poor child, I am sorry—' the doctor checked himself, and asked abruptly—'And you tell me (it is necessary for a doctor to know these things) that, in your opinion, her present illness is intensified by the fact of her lover having jilted her?'

'I believe so, or rather my mother, who has seen Miss Dysart more lately than I, is of that opinion; but mind you, she herself has never accused him of having done so. Her own sister does not know whether the engagement between them was broken off by her wish or his. It is only by private inquiries relating to a matter in which Mr Vane was concerned, that I have assured myself, not only that he must have deserted the innocent girl who confided in him, but at a time and in a manner which must have cruelly intensified the shock to her. Will you come and see her, doctor? Perhaps your skill—'

The doctor interrupted him.

'My dear sir, you do not need to ask me. I would do so gladly, and for more reasons than one; but first I must tell you something. It is my duty to do so in any case, but it is a painful duty; and I must ask your forbearance beforehand. Do you know this photograph?'

He had opened an album lying beside him, and now handed it to the curate, one finger resting on the page. Lion started back, crimsoning to the temples.

'Mr Vane!' he said, hoarsely, his right hand clutching itself involuntarily. 'You know him, then?'

'I know him intimately,' answered the doctor. 'I could hardly fail to do so, seeing that he is my wife's brother.'

'Your wife's— It is impossible!'

'It is a fact; and the reason why I mention it, Mr Ashleigh, is that, considering Gareth Vane's relations to Miss Dysart, it is hardly probable that she would be unaware of the relationship; in which case my visiting her might, if she is in the weak state you describe, have a prejudicial effect on her nerves.'

'Gareth Vane is your brother-in-law?' repeated Lionel. He was too much taken by surprise to have room for any other idea. 'Then, perhaps, you knew of this story before?'

'I knew something of it certainly, not your version. I wish now that I had done so. That I did not inquire further into it will be a subject of pain to me for the rest of my life.'

'Why? Had you anything to do with his—'

'His fickleness? Mr Ashleigh, I will be frank with you. In some measure I had. He came here one day and announced, in a somewhat off-hand, jesting manner, that he was engaged to Miss Dysart. That announcement was, for very serious reasons with which I will not trouble you, exceedingly distasteful both to his sister and myself; so much so that, to be plain, we could not under any circumstances have encouraged it. Further, Mr

Vane owned that the young lady's mother had refused her consent; and considering that his acquaintance with the former was of the very briefest nature, that he had been in love a dozen times at least within half as many years, and that unless he married a rich woman he had no means on which to support a wife, I considered myself justified in stating our objections to the match, and asking him to pause a little, at any rate, and reflect before rushing into it. As to whether that request did affect his after conduct, or what that conduct may have been (you own that your opinion of it is formed on purely inferential evidence), I know nothing whatever. The sequel of the story I never learnt; but from what I had heard of Miss Dysart, I confess I did not think it as necessary to consider her feelings in the matter as much as I now wish I had done.'

'If you ever heard an injurious word of Miss Dysart, Dr Hamilton,' said Lion, fiercely, 'you heard a slander—'

The doctor interrupted him gently.

'I heard that she had jilted a better and worthier man than my brother-in-law,' he said, quietly, 'and I fear that she has met a bitter return for her folly. Mr Ashleigh, you have been too generous in this matter not to be more generous still. Believe that it is as painful to me as to you, and that while my advice was purely given and simply from a sense of right, I am not answerable for the consequences.'

'You mean that this report that he is going to marry a rich widow is true?' said Lionel bitterly.

'I mean that he was married a fortnight ago to a woman who has had him in her toils for the last five years, and would have kept him in them whether he had made Miss Dysart his wife or not. The poor little girl—God help her!—has had a lucky escape.'

There was unmistakable feeling in the doctor's tone. Even Lion could not refuse to recognise it; but, indeed, he had no wish to do so. A man who is thoroughly honest himself is the least likely to be unduly suspicious of the honesty of others; and the troubled look in his host's eyes, the utter sadness of his tone, were evidences rather of an excess of sympathy than the reverse, especially in a man who could have no personal interest in Sybil Dysart.

Looking at the doctor, Lion almost wondered at the worn, aged expression which had come over his face since the beginning of the interview.

'I believe you most thoroughly,' he said; 'and thank you

for your candour. I have no right, of course, to ask what were your reasons for objecting to Miss Dysart's marriage with your brother-in-law, and I suppose it would come invidiously from me to say that if it was from your knowledge of that gentleman's character I think you were quite justified. All I regret is that this should deprive her of your professional assistance. Your skill in these cases—'

'Has been much exaggerated, I assure you. Phthisis is by no means a speciality of mine, and I could tell you of a dozen better men than myself at it. One thing I promise you, that the best advice there is to be had in London or Great Britain, Miss Dysart shall have, and without delay or expense. And now tell me, if you like, something more about the case. I think you said the young lady's father died of rapid consumption ?'

'Yes, and aggravated in his case also by a mental shock. He had lost a younger sister under very painful circumstances ; and it preyed on his mind so severely that when illness set in he had no strength to get over it. It is the same thing repeated in his daughter.'

The doctor was silent for a moment ; then he said, in an accent which, but for his previous kindness, would have sounded like a sneer,—

'It is seldom that brothers take the loss of a sister so deeply to heart. By "painful circumstances," however, I suppose you mean that the lady's death was violent, or at least sudden ?'

'No ; I believe it was decline in her case also ; but she was quite a young girl and had ran away from school some time beforehand ; and the news of her death was the first that reached him of her. This is a private matter ; but I don't mind telling it you, as all the actors in it are dead and gone now, except the man who was the cause of the poor girl's ruin ; and whatever may have become of him, little Amy Dysart's wrongs—'

'Wrongs ! Whoever Mr Ashleigh may be, this is a strange place to speak of *Amy Dysart's* "wrongs" in ; the house from which her infamy banished all happiness fifteen years ago. It is wives who are wronged in these matters, sir, not the girls who find their profit in them.'

The interruption did not come from Dr Hamilton. It was a woman's voice which broke in upon them and startled the physician as much as his guest.

Both gentlemen rose involuntarily and saw facing them a stately, middle-aged lady, who had entered the room towards

the end of Lionel's sentence, and was standing behind his host's chair, her eyes flashing indignantly.

'*Helen!*' exclaimed the doctor, 'is it you?' He had been calm enough before; but the sudden appearance of his wife broke down the mask of coolness. His voice was as agitated as hers. 'Pray go away. We are discussing business—this gentleman and I. It has nothing to do with you. For my sake, leave us.'

'No, John, not now,' said Mrs Hamilton; and if Lionel had been startled by her appearance, he was still more so by the ghastly pallor of her face. 'It is for your sake I stay. Business! What business has this clergyman to be raking up Amy Dysart's shameful story at this hour? What harm does he want to do you? The harm you did was to me; and if *I* condone it—'

'Madam,' said Lionel, interrupting her, 'it is you who are harming your husband. You know more of this "shameful story" than I do; and the errand I came on was an entirely different one: though I can hardly believe that Amy Dysart, whether dead, as her relations believe her to be, or still living, deserves the hard names that you have been pleased to use towards her. Dr Hamilton—' But the doctor turned from him, and laid his hand on his wife's shoulder.

'Helen,' he said, authoritatively, yet with unmistakable tenderness, 'you are wrong in this, as you have been all through. Mr Ashleigh cannot harm me, and will not do so; and he is right to defend the name of one who, whatever I may be, was as innocent in thought and deed as yourself. Stay here, if you please. I have no right to forbid you to do so; only forgive me if, by remaining, you hear things which I would fain have spared you.' And then, turning to Lionel, with folded arms: 'Plain speaking is best. What is it you have to say to me, sir?'

'Nothing at present,' said Lionel shortly. 'Not long ago, Dr Hamilton, I, as a clergyman, had to hear the confession of a remorseful woman, whose selfishness had driven her young sister-in-law from home. That selfishness received its first punishment when her husband died, broken-hearted at his sister's ruin and death. Of the man to whom the former was owing, nothing was ever known. It seems to me that I have found him to-day. You are that man, and I understand your objections to the marriage we were speaking of. I have nothing more to say to you.'

CHAPTER VII.

DR HAMILTON TELLS HIS STORY.

'STAY, Mr Ashleigh,' said the doctor quietly, 'I do not want to keep you against your will ; but you have said either too much or too little already ; too much a great deal if we are to be friends, too little if we are to be enemies. In justice, not to myself, but to those others who are affected by your accusations, more especially'—he paused, and added in a voice of strong emotion—'to her who, laid in her early grave so many years ago, is not even suffered to rest there in peace, I must ask you to remain a little longer.'

'To what purpose?' said Lionel scornfully. 'You carry off these matters with a high hand, Dr Hamilton ; but, after all, you are safe in doing so. Whatever your connection with this poor girl may have been, I have no right to call you to account for it ; nor for the sake of those who bear her name would I claim one if I could. If you can rest in peace with the memory of that early grave you speak of, do so ; I, at any rate, have no wish to disturb either it or your wife's happiness. You have been candid with her at all events, it appears, and have been fortunate in preserving her regard. Mine must be as little to you as yours is to me, and with your leave I would rather cut short our acquaintance here. Good afternoon.'

'John,' said Mrs Hamilton. She had sunk into a chair when her husband first spoke to her, her head drooping forward, her hands locked together ; but now she lifted her face, drawn and livid as if in actual torture. 'John, let him go. It is nothing to him. He will not say anything ; it is between you and me.'

The doctor came close to her and laid his hand on her shoulder. 'Between you and me!' he said, bitterly. 'Yes, Helen, you are right. It has been there too long by far, marring the happiness of two lives, when perhaps plain speaking at the beginning might, God knows, have yet come in time to heal and save them. For your sake and mine, if for no other, there shall be no more of it at present, not even at your bidding. We are getting old people now, wife, and may talk of these things more coolly. Will you stay and hear the plain truth, hard as it may be to tell and hear, or will you go to your room and let this clergyman speak to you afterwards? Impatient as

he is, he is too honest himself to refuse to listen to me if I tell him that in all he has said he is utterly and entirely mistaken.'

'In what way?' said Lionel. He had resumed his seat almost involuntarily, in obedience to the doctor's authoritative tone and gesture; but the whole scene had something inexpressibly painful and solemn in it to him. What dark picture of sundered lives, and home happiness murdered in its youth, had he stepped into? Was this wife really ignorant of the facts she was trying so passionately to hide? He would have given worlds if she would have gone away, and left him and the other man to speak to each other freely as men might: but she neither moved nor answered, and her husband made no further effort to persuade her.

'Mr Ashleigh,' he said, shortly, 'you have accused me of a crime which not only dishonours a man, but his victim. This crime I never committed.'

'You did not! It was not you then—'

“Who ruined Amy Dysart.” Those were your words, I think, Mr Ashleigh; and if any man had spoken them when I was a few years younger, he would have got a hotter rejoinder. Ruined *her*! Do men ruin the things they love and reverence best in the world? Would you stamp on the nestless bird which flutters half-frozen to your feet through a winter's gale? Amy Dysart was a girl, orphaned, friendless, cast out upon the world by those who should have cared for her. She came to me for love, and I gave it her; for shelter and protection, and she had them. For ruin! She was too innocent to know the meaning of the word, and neither from me nor any other did she ever learn it. She died here in these arms, and I pray God my own little lassies, that you hear chattering in the room above, may die as pure and stainless in fact and thought as that dead girl, whose name, so roughly handled to-day, has been a sealed and sacred one with me for fifteen years.’

There was utter silence in the room for a moment. Through it you could hear the children's voices, to which the doctor had alluded, laughing in the schoolroom, and the autumn wind whistling through the shrubbery without. Mrs Hamilton had started, and made a movement as if to rise while her husband was speaking; but he still stood beside her, his hand resting, perhaps unconsciously, on her shoulder, and she sank back again trembling very much. In the one hasty glance Lionel gave her he thought she was going to faint; yet she managed

to keep her place, and sat still, her head drooping, her hands clasped as before.

‘Dr Hamilton, I beg your pardon,’ said the curate very gravely. ‘I will stay as long as you like. This is a painful subject, and I need not tell you how thankful I am to hear what you have just told me. I cannot disbelieve you, little as it tallies with what has gone before; all I wish is that this poor girl’s relations had known it too. It would have saved much misery and remorse both to them and—others.’

The doctor smiled bitterly.

‘If any words of mine could have aggravated that misery and remorse they would have been spoken long ago,’ he said; ‘as it is, I am not Christian enough even now to regret what I think well deserved. What had Amy Dysart ever done that she should have been driven from her home?’

‘She was sent, so Mrs Dysart told me, to a good school.’

‘To a good school! But there—you shall hear the whole story. Your relation to the girl who bears her name, and the suffering which I have unhappily been the means of bringing on her, give you a right to that much, and it may be a warning to you. I suppose I was about your age when all this happened—fifteen years ago, and barely forty-five now! Yes, I was not quite thirty. My first practice was a very small one in Glasgow, but I gave it up as soon as I could; and a paper on “The Treatment of Throat Diseases” which I had written, and which was published in *The Lancet*, attracted sufficient attention to give me courage to move south and assume a better position. I chose Brighton for the purpose. I had letters of recommendation to two or three influential people there, and I knew it was largely populated by girls’ schools, to whom the frosts and fogs of our climate were especially prejudicial.

‘Well, the move was a success—in one way, at any rate. Begin in a certain style and with a certain prestige, and in such a place you are pretty sure to succeed. The only drawback is that the prestige costs something, and the style something more. For every paying patient that I got in those first two years my expenses exactly doubled my fees; and before the end of the third, when many of my *confrères* were speaking enviously of me as that fortunate Scotch fellow Hamilton, I was so heavily in debt that at times I was almost tempted to throw the whole thing up and emigrate. Of course it was my own fault. Begin as an unknown struggling young surgeon, spending twopence-halfpenny a-year because you have only two-

pence-halfpenny to spend, and be content to plod on in a small third-rate way, till by one thing or another you can turn your pence into sixpences, and you are pretty safe to plod on in the same small third-rate way for the next dozen years, or perhaps to drop out and be crushed in the common struggle for existence, as fifty better men than yourself have been. But come to a place with a flourish of well-devised trumpets, announcing you as a fashionable young doctor, clever, well-to-do, who has made a name already, and who, if folks don't treat him properly, will just as soon take it, his skill, and his prestige elsewhere as stay amongst them, and he is sure to succeed and be made much of. That was the line I adopted at any rate. Before the end of the three years I have mentioned I had got the name of being one of the most rising young surgeons in Brighton, had one or two titled people on my list of patients, lived in handsome rooms, gave snug dinners, and rode as good a horse as any you could see upon the Parade ; at which same time I was exactly fifteen hundred pounds in debt—not to the Brighton tradespeople, I was too shrewd to risk my standing by any such folly as that, but to the London Jews, who advanced me the money I required.

‘ It was about this time that I first met Amy Dysart.

‘ Among the poorer patients on my list I happened just then to be attending a young German clarionet-player from the orchestra at the Theatre Royal. He had injured his knee badly in some way, and when I was sent for it seemed likely that the leg would have to come off. I managed to save it, but it was a long job. I don't think the poor fellow left his bed for a good three months ; and as he had no relations and few friends in Brighton he might have fared badly enough, but for the visits from his sweetheart, who came to see him two or three times a week, and for an idea of mine, that he might benefit me and himself by teaching me German. Being a bachelor, I could generally find some odd hour in the day or evening for taking a lesson, and it was in this way that I saw his *lieber Fräulein* more frequently than I might otherwise have done.

‘ It was in that way that I saw Amy Dysart also ; for the two came together. The German was a common-place, middle-class young woman, a teacher in some school, and as thick-headed and uninteresting as the generality of her kind ; but Amy Dysart was something so widely different that the wonder was to see her in such companionship at all. Well, you see that portrait, so you can make some guess at the loveliness it suggests ;

but it can only be a guess after all. In all these years I have never seen, among pictures or women, anything to equal the exquisite flower-like beauty of that girl of seventeen. There was a mystery about her too. Though slightly un-English in dress and appearance, there was a refinement and daintiness about both which separated her widely from her companion ; her little hands were as white as snow, her manner a charming contrast of spoilt-child playfulness and *abandon* with a pensive melancholy which, when she was silent or thoughtful, gave her delicate features an air of riper age than her years warranted. Who she was, however, or what was her name, I did not know. The Fräulein never called her anything but the pet title of Blümchen in addressing her, "My Friend," in speaking of her ; and the clarionet-player professed the same ignorance as myself on the subject : while when I tried to find out something about the fair visitor from herself, she put aside my queries jestingly, and declared she was only a friend of the Fräulein's, a stranger, a gipsy, a German Princess in disguise—anything, in fact, which came into her wilful head at the moment to say.

'Of course we made friends. It would hardly have been natural if we had not done so, I being a young unmarried man with no home-ties and all a man's natural admiration for a beautiful girl ; and she scarcely more than a child, with nothing to do and no intimate friend or relation of her own sex to warn and guide her. Not that I was young beside her. Thirty compared with seventeen seems almost middle-aged to the former, and, added to my position as "the doctor," gave me all the privileges of years and dignity in her eyes ; while on the other hand her extreme youth and innocence, and a certain sweet and winning frankness of address, gave her a charm in my eyes quite different to that of any other girl I had ever met, and enabled me to treat her with something of the authority and familiar kindness that one shows to a favourite child.

'I had no idea—I say it on my honour—of her real position. If I made any guesses at it, it was that she was attached to the corps of the Theatre Royal ; or to a troupe of ballad-singers styling themselves the "Anglo-Continental Concert Company," which was then starring in Brighton. Something in the foreign element about her—she used scraps of German and Italian continually, to help out her conversation—something too—yes, I will say it frankly—in the perfect freedom and fearlessness of her manner, which, though most purely innocent, and owing, as I learnt later, to her having been brought up abroad, and more

among men than women, was yet widely different both from the severe formality of the Scotch young women I had known in my earlier days, and the unformed shyness of ordinary English girls at her age, led me to the opinion ; and, in the spirit of child-like fun, she rather encouraged the mistake than corrected it.

‘It was an unfortunate one on both sides ; for though it facilitated our friendship, it led to all the unhappiness that followed.

‘We were happy enough at the time, however, and intimate enough. Fräulein Bertha’s visits were never long enough to make it worth while for me to give up my lesson ; and as it would have been brutal to deprive her lover of the full benefit of them, Blümchen and I used to adjourn to the landing outside and talk to each other there till the Fräulein came out and hurried her off, with audible ejaculations of fear lest she should be late.

‘An odd, unromantic place for a man’s first love idyll, perhaps—a dirty, uncarpeted landing, up three flights of narrow stairs, and lit by a ghastly little window looking down over a wilderness of house-tops, and crusted with the dust and sea-salt of years ! Yet all the same (I blame none for it but myself), whenever I look back to the spot where the happiest moments of my whole life have been passed, I see nothing but a vision of that tiny square of blackened boards at the top of a third-rate lodging-house, with myself leaning against the creaking railing, and a slight girl-figure perched on the narrow window-shelf, an exquisite girl-face relieved against the dusty panes : always that—nothing more !

‘She told me plenty about herself in these talks : that she was born in Dresden and had lived in Italy ; that she had neither father nor mother, nothing but a brother whom she loved dearly, passionately, but who had been turned against her by his wife—a cruel, hard, selfish woman, who had made her life miserable while she was at home, and then driven her out into the world ; and that now her brother too had ceased to care for her. He never even answered her letters, and she was all alone among a lot of people she hated. She had not even a friend, except the poor Fräulein there ; and once she had gone down to the end of the Chain Pier of an evening and thought she would drown herself.

‘Poor child ! I remember now how she turned her face to the window and burst out sobbing and crying when she said that ; and how I went up to her and comforted her. I was so

much the elder that she let me do so almost as if I were her brother himself. Yet little as I had known or cared for women hitherto—wrapped up in my work and my ambition as I was—I knew that it was not quite as a brother that I felt to the pretty creature who let me stroke her soft drooping head unrebuked ; and when a few days later I said smilingly to her,—‘You will never think of drowning yourself again, Blümchen, or say you have no nearer friend than Fräulein Bertha?’ the sudden, shining look of tender gratitude she gave me might have told anyone how easily a man can fill a lonely young heart if he will, and that already her brother’s cruelty had become a softened matter to her. Yet though I soon got to know and rejoice in both facts with perfect security, and to feel that even the few moments I could spend with that sweet, childlike nature were worth all the rest of my toiling, monotonous life, we never actually talked of love to one another, still less of marriage. For my part, the latter was so utterly out of the question, unless I were to marry some rich woman, that I never thought of it, or the future at all, as regarded Blümchen, and trusted to her extreme youth and guilelessness to keep her from any fancy of the sort. She knew that I cared for her : I had told her that my life was as bare and lonely as hers until she came into it like a star to brighten it ; but we called the caring “friendship,” and rested happily in the enjoyment of it.

‘An end was coming to all this however. I had not seen the Fräulein or Blümchen for more than a fortnight, and was getting as irritated and disappointed as my patient at the deprivation, when one day I received a letter from the principal of a rather fashionable school, which I had long wished to get upon my list, requesting my professional attendance on two or three of her pupils who were laid up with bad throats. It was a very civil letter, alluding complimentarily to my reputation in the treatment of those ailments, and I went accordingly ; but it was a surprise to me to recognise in the governess conducting a German class in one of the lower rooms, Fräulein Bertha ! She, however, was on the watch for me, and managed, somewhat to my annoyance, to come behind me, and whisper, as I was crossing the hall in the rear of the principal,—

‘“Herr doctor, for Gott’s sake do not be surprise, or say noting upstairs. If you do I sall be ruin and Blümchen too.”

‘The principal turned her head at the moment, and Fräulein Bertha hurried on. But I had not long to wait for an explanation of her words, for in the second room I was taken into I

found, seated cowering over a fire and wrapped up in shawls, the girl who of late had become so much—too much to me.

“ Miss Amy Dysart,” said the principal blandly; “ a parlour boarder, who has managed to catch a bad cough during the late wet weather. This is our new doctor, Miss Dysart, and I hope you will pay more attention to his prescriptions than you have done to Dr Snarl’s.”

‘ I was too taken by surprise to utter a word; but I shook hands with Amy, and the look of delight which flashed into her sweet eyes, hollowed already by illness, might have betrayed our secret if the schoolmistress had been quick-sighted, even though at the same moment she put her finger on her lips to entreat silence from me.

‘ From that time all the pleasant freedom of our intercourse was at an end. Blümchen, my charming young concert-singer, the sweetheart and playfellow of my leisure hours, was one thing; but Amy Dysart, a girl of good family and pupil in a fashionable college, was quite another; and at first I was almost glad that she was sufficiently ill to make the change of feeling and position easier to me: for to a medical man a patient, whatever she may be at other times, should only be a patient, nothing more; and I trust I understood the duties of my profession sufficiently to treat her simply and solely as such. It was a difficult task, however, and complicated by my anxiety about her; for she was worse than they supposed. Her lungs were already unmistakably diseased; and there was a tendency to rapid prostration in her, alarming in one so young; yet I defy my worst enemies to say that I ever, by word or look, betrayed one jot of the anxiety or tenderness I felt for her; nay, not even when her big eyes would follow me about full of wistful reproach for my new gravity and reserve, nor when she asked me once in a trembling whisper,—

‘ “ Dr Hamilton, are you angry with me? Why don’t you talk to me, and what makes you so different?” We were alone for a moment, and she put out her hand to me as she spoke; but though I took it, I only pressed it gently and let it go.

• “ No, child, I am not angry,” I said; “ but I am only a doctor now. When you are well I will talk to you; not till then or here.”

‘ From that moment I believe she made up her mind that, actually or seemingly, she would get well—well enough to go out again—as soon as possible.

‘ About this time, however, things were happening of suf-

ficient importance to me to distract my mind from what I had begun to consider a perilously painful complication. Dr Forceps-Brown of Surbiton made his first overtures to me through his brother at Brighton ; and of course I was greatly excited on the subject. It was the grandest thing that had yet happened to me in my professional career, the biggest and most tangible proof of the success I had already made so far as name was concerned, and an assured guarantee of ease and competence in the future ; but almost all good things have their conditions, and Dr Forceps-Brown's offer was no exception to the rule. His main object was to pave the way to his own ultimate retirement, and he therefore asked three things of his intended partner : that he should be a married man, have a good reputation already, and be in a position to pay a lump sum of money down on entering into the alliance.

“ And I am a bachelor unfortunately,” I said to the Brighton Dr Brown.

“ But need not remain so unless you please, need you ? ” said the great man. “ What are these rumours about you and the handsome young heiress at Marston House ? People say that the lady is willing, and the lover only holding back from scruples of pride or prudence. I should think this plan of my brother's would smooth matters for both, and that the money you must have made during your bachelorhood (I told him how you had flourished here) could not be better invested than in the way suggested. Shall I congratulate you ? ”

“ I thanked him warmly, but disclaimed any right to congratulations, assuring him that the rumours were quite unfounded ; my acquaintance with the lady in question being one of friendship only. The big man smiled incredulously.

“ You are either very prudent or very modest,” he said. “ However, I am doubtless premature. Suppose you think it over and consult your—friends ! I can give you ten days, but no more. My brother is in a hurry ; and, as you must know, you have rivals in the field.”

“ I have not mentioned Miss Vane hitherto,” said Dr Hamilton, speaking for the first time with some hesitation and a downward glance at the silent figure seated in the low chair near him, ‘ but I must do so now. She was a young lady of six or seven-and-twenty, wealthy, accomplished, and virtuous, living in her own house under the chaperonage of a maiden aunt ; and almost more run after and courted than any other woman in Brighton. I had attended the aunt for some time

back, and was received by both ladies as a friend into the bargain. I had the greatest esteem and liking for Miss Vane, and should have felt her friendship an honour had she been penniless. As things were, however, my own position would have made the thought of anything more a presumption ; and I had, therefore, never entertained it, though I was aware that other people, jealous perhaps of my intimacy at the house, said —I mean attributed—

‘Need you try to put it prettily ? I thought you said *all* the truth should be told at last,’ said Mrs Hamilton. She had managed to subdue her agitation, and spoke for the first time in a hard, grating tone, lifting her colourless face for a moment. ‘Let it be so with regard to me, at any rate. I was Miss Vane, Mr Ashleigh. What the Brighton people said was that I was in love with Dr Hamilton ; and he believed them. My aunt also said that he was in love with me, and I believed her. They were right, however, and she was wrong—how wrong he tells you now ; but I do not blame her for misleading me, for she was foolish enough to love me very dearly herself. What followed you can guess. Before the ten days were out Dr Hamilton asked me to be his wife, having first frankly owned to the money difficulties which hitherto had prevented him from marrying, and I accepted him. A woman can hardly feel happier than in making the man she loves happy and rich too at the same time ; and I honoured my lover more for the manly pride which had held him back at the outset, and for the calm and reserve of his manner, from the contrast it afforded to the slavish devotion lavished on me by other men. I never guessed for one moment that he was in love with another woman. I trusted him utterly.’

‘And, believe it or not as you will,’ said the doctor, ‘when I found that you were willing to accept me I had the fullest intention of meriting that trust. I thought myself stronger than I was ; but I suppose no man knows his own weakness till it has been tried ; and my trial came to me very soon—the next time I met Amy Dysart. It was at the old place, the young German’s lodgings ; and I don’t think I ever was more surprised or startled than at the sight of her, whom I had last seen a week back in her sick-room, waiting for me on the landing, lovelier than ever, though far more delicate-looking, and holding out both hands with a mischievous smile as she told me the Fräulein was inside with her lover, and I might stay and talk to her, for now she was “ Blümchen again.”

‘Alas! not *my* Blümchen; and in the shock and agitation of discovering how dear she was to me just as I had been making plans which would separate us for ever, I tried vainly to disguise my emotion by reproaching her for having ventured out in her state of health. She only laughed, however, and declared that she was well now, quite well. Her cough? Oh, that was nothing; she had coughed ever since she came to England, and her sister-in-law made game of it. I was not to come to see her at the school any more. She didn’t like me as a doctor at all. She wanted to be “Blümchen,” nothing more; while, when I turned my reproaches on to her having deceived me, she first pleaded that she had promised the Fräulein not to tell who she was, lest it should leak out that a young lady from Alexandra House had been brought to these squalid lodgings; and then, seeing I still looked grave, burst into tears, which it would have required a brute—not a man, and a man as much in love as he could be—to leave unsoothed.

‘In a word, our interview was more like that between two lovers than it had ever been before; and when we parted it was with the conviction on my side that unless I was prepared to fling name, fame, and fortune to the winds for the sake of Amy Dysart, it would be madness for us to meet again.

‘Yet we *did*, twice, though not in the same place. God knows how often the poor child went there in the interim in the hope of seeing me, for several weeks intervened, and during the course of them my practice had been disposed of, and my removal to Surbiton settled; though it was arranged that the marriage between me and Miss Vane should not take place for a couple of months, nor be publicly announced to our friends till I had taken up my residence in my new quarters; her own family and the Forceps-Browns being of course excepted. In the meanwhile I had purposely dropped my German lessons and altered my hours for visiting the clarionet-player; therefore it was purely by chance that one day Amy and I happened to encounter each other in a narrow country road skirting the sea some little way out of Brighton. Our interview then was short and very painful. The weather was bitterly cold, and she was looking far more ill than I had yet seen her; while her manner was full of a new agitation and timidity, consequent, as I felt with remorse, on the self-betrayals of the last meeting. Once she asked me tremulously if I had really been in earnest when I said that it might ruin me in my profession if it were known that I had been keeping up a clandestine correspondence

with one of my younger patients, a girl of seventeen and a pupil in one of the schools I attended. But when I told her that it was true, and then (being anxious to break a little my intended departure to her, of which I found she was quite ignorant) hinted that, even as things were, I might, for her sake and my own, be obliged to leave Brighton, she turned so white that I thought she was going to faint, and like a coward I tried to retract the words by saying that such a step would be more wretched for me than for her, as I could never again live happily away from her.

'I daresay I looked wretched enough at that moment. A man launched without any deliberate will of his own on a career of double-dealing and concealment can hardly feel very cheerful, and between love and prudence I feel half distraught—prudence for her as well as for myself; love for myself as well as her. I was glad to put an end to it at last by a somewhat abrupt departure; but when I had gone a few yards I looked back, and there stood Amy, motionless, her face hidden in her hands, weeping evidently as if her heart would break. The sight was too much for me, and next moment I was back at her side, kissing the pretty, tear-stained face for the first time in my life, and begging her by every tender name I could think of not to cry, or she would break my heart, I loved her so dearly.'

'Three nights later, when even the crossing-sweeper at the end of the street knew I was leaving Brighton, and just as I had begun the task of sorting my papers and pamphlets preparatory to packing them, there came a low, hurried knock at the front-door. My servant-boy had gone to bed; so I went to answer it myself, and somewhat to my surprise a lady entered. The next moment I nearly staggered back, for as she lifted the thick veil she wore, I recognised in the pale face beneath, the cloaked and shrouded figure, *Amy Dysart!*'

CHAPTER VIII.

DR HAMILTON'S STORY CONTINUED.

'At first I could hardly believe my eyes; but when she said my name in a trembling whisper, and clung to me with hands as cold as ice, I knew that it was Blümchen herself and no vision; and dreading what might have happened I drew her hurriedly

into the study, closed the door, and asked her why she had come and what was the matter. For all answer she pointed to the preparations for departure scattered about my room, and stammered out,—

“It is true, then. You were going!” then flinging herself at my feet burst into a passion of weeping and told me that she had only heard it that day. The principal had said I was leaving Brighton at once, and she (Blümchen) knew it was on her account; and so she had run away and come to me to ask me to take her with me. If I loved her, she loved me too. If I was poor, so was she. If I could not live happily away from her, away from me she should die. It was only I who had made life bearable to her when the desertion and cruelty of her brother and sister showed she had nothing more to hope for from them; and if I did not want her she would just go away and drown herself. But I did, did I not? I should be glad to have her, my little Blümchen, to wait on me and work for me, and spend her life in making me happy? And then, still crouching at my feet and grasping both my hands in her slender fingers, she lifted her young face to me with such a white, wild, impassioned glance as gave to even its fresh loveliness something of awe as she waited for the rapturous answer she never doubted I would give. When she saw me instead turn pale and begin a faltering remonstrance, the brightness in her eyes faded out in a dull glare, her rosy lips blanched, and with a low cry, “O God! you *don't* love me then!” she sank back upon the floor and lay there prone and unconscious as if dead.

‘Mr Ashleigh, you have condemned me; but think of my situation and be just. Here was this pretty young creature, the only being I had ever loved with anything approaching to passion, utterly alone in the world, utterly friendless, pleading with me and begging me to take her away, and showing in every quiver of her wasted little hands, in the feverish glitter of her sunken but beautiful eyes, what ravages even the last few weeks of sorrow and suspense had made in her; and here was I, the man who loved her and whom she loved, already engaged to another, and so hampered in my profession as you have seen that to marry her would have been to sign my own ruin in any case. Yet even then, dragged one way and another as I was, tortured, tempted, and hardly able to know what was best or worst when there seemed nothing but blackness on every side, even then I would have resisted the Tempter's whisper to take her at her word if the first syllables she uttered on recover-

ing from that terribly deathlike swoon had not cut the ground from under my feet and silenced all my arguments in favour of her return to the establishment she had quitted. I was kneeling beside her, her head lying on my arm ; and as her blue eyes opened on my agitated face a faint little smile came into them and she whispered,—

“ ‘Have I been ill ? How frightened and unhappy you look ! But I was wicked, I remember. I said you did not love me, and you do. I knew you did. I left a letter for them at the school saying I was gone to the only person that loved me, and then I came here and waited—ah ! so long, till I saw the lights go out in your kitchen and up to the attics, I said to myself then : ‘Now the servants will be gone to bed and he will be alone.’ I was afraid of them lest they should tell the principal where I was and have me taken back ; but now you will not let me be. We will go away together ; and if they find it out after we are married no one shall blame you. I will say it was I who made you do it ; and that if you had not taken me I should have gone straight down to that black windy sea there, which is always moan, moan, moaning through the nights when my cough won’t let me sleep, and put my head under it. I should not be afraid of that. Louis does not care for me, and the girls are horrible at that place. I would rather die than go back to them.’ ”

‘ And I believe on my soul that she meant it, and that even if I had seen her safely within the doors of the school, she would have gone down to that very sea next morning and drowned herself. If you here had seen the look in her face that night you would have felt the same. And I loved her ! One effort I made. “O Blümchen !” I said, “I do love you. You know it too well, child, and it is wicked of you to talk of drowning yourself. But what can I do ? I am heavily in debt as it is. I could not even afford to keep you as you have been kept. I cannot marry—”

‘ She interrupted me with a little gay laugh,—

“ ‘No, not yet, I know, but we can wait ; and meanwhile I will be your little servant or your sister. I can do such a lot of things for you, and I shall not cost you anything. See here ! These will get plenty of money to buy me food and clothes ; and I eat so little, you can’t think. At that school which looks so fine they nearly starve us. When I first went there I often used to cry, I felt so hungry at night ; but now I am never hungry.’ ” And she drew out an old velvet bag from her

pocket, and untying it showed me first a quaint necklace set with emeralds, then a couple of rings, pearl and diamond, and three or four other trinkets, all more or less valuable, which she told me had been her mother's, but which I could take and sell for our joint benefit.

'What could I do? I had never seen such a combination of utterly childish innocence and womanly passion in my life; and already the night was getting on. They were probably searching for her already. If she were found with me, I should be simply destroyed. If I took her back it would be just as bad; for I had seen for myself how recklessly imprudent she was, and in her misery she would be almost sure to betray herself and me too. In my mind's eye I even seemed to see the horrible little paragraph in the Brighton papers: "*Elopement from a fashionable girl's school. Strange revelations about a certain popular young surgeon;*" and I shuddered at the vision, and at the certain downfall of every hope of carrying out my almost completed partnership with Dr Forceps-Brown if the story got about. Scorn me if you will. I was a coward, and I own it; but I was not a villain, for I could not have wronged the child who trusted in me with such innocent, loving confidence; though not even for the sake of that love could I dare disgrace, beggary, and the mocking triumph of rivals whom I had supplanted, or brave the despair and anguish in her eyes if I were to tell her I was engaged to another woman. And yet all through it I loved her, in my way, so dearly, I had so little time for deliberation. How in the end I decided you will see. The great thing for the time was to get her out of the house and to some place of safety before the servants were astir in the morning. They were only two, an old woman and the page-boy; and I had noticed that the former was in the habit of leaving her bonnet and cloak hanging on the kitchen-door downstairs. When Amy was rested and well refreshed with food and wine (I had told her part of my plan and she was quite bright and happy), I dressed her up in these things, managing by the aid of a pair of spectacles, a green gauze veil, and sundry wraps, to give her quite the look of a dowdy old woman. Then I wrote a letter to a person at New Cross which I gave her; and we left the house together. There was a train from Brighton at ten minutes past six, which reached London at half-past eight; and in that train Amy Dysart left Brighton. I had walked with her almost to the station (in the darkness of a winter's morning there was no fear of anyone recognising me)

and heard her pretty voice mimicking the cracked tones of an old woman asking for her ticket to London Bridge. Then the train went off and I returned home, let myself in as noiselessly as I had gone out, and, after making a few arrangements below, went quietly to bed. Twenty minutes later I was noisily aroused by my old woman knocking at the door and vowing that thieves had been in the house during the night, for that on going down-stairs a few minutes back she had found the kitchen-window open, and my silver cruet-stand, as well as her own bonnet, shawl and handbag gone. (N.B.—That handbag contained Amy's hat and scarf, and a few other things to enable her on getting to London to resume her original appearance in the waiting-room at New Cross.) Of course I made a great fuss, threw on my clothes in wild haste, and then rushed off, nominally to the police-station, but really to cab it to a distant telegraph office, whence I telegraphed to the person at New Cross that my sister was coming up to town for medical advice; and that as I was unable to follow her for a day or two, I had sent the child to her lodgings, and trusted she would receive all care and attention. I did not use my own name, but one which I had taken when up in London once for a lark in my student days, and by which this person had known me; and after that I went home and pursued my daily avocations as usual, even finding time to visit my sick German and ask him laughingly how the Fräulein and her young friend were, and whether they would be interrupting us to-day.

'Of course there was a great hubbub about Miss Dysart's disappearance for the first day or two. Inquiries were made by the police, and an advertisement put in the paper, and even now I wonder that no suspicion ever attached to me. I believe that in the beginning *one* person, Fräulein Bertha, had some, for she came to my house and told me of her pupil's disappearance, weeping profusely and looking narrowly at me as if to see if I showed any sign of being guilty of it; but I manifested such lively horror and anger at the news, accused her so roundly of being the cause of the affair by taking the child into low places, and threatened to acquaint the principal with all I knew of her conduct unless she could swear to me that she had neither introduced Miss Dysart to anyone, nor been otherwise accessory to her elopement, that the woman was thoroughly frightened, and ended by piteous entreaties that I would shield her, and hold my tongue as to ever having seen the girl except at the school.

'Perhaps, however, my best security was in the fact that *I* was there, on the spot, visible to everyone, paying farewell visits all round, and announcing for the first time my approaching marriage to Miss Vane—a thing in itself enough to disarm suspicion; but, indeed, the school was so thoroughly bad at core and mismanaged, that I think the heads of it were more anxious to hush up the affair than make it unpleasantly public by a too active inquiry for the missing girl.

'In this way four days passed, and then, and not till then, I went quietly up to Surbiton, saw my new partner, and two hours later was at New Cross. I expected to find Amy by that time a good deal subdued, perhaps (now that the first excitement of her adventure was over) rather frightened and penitent, and not unwilling to listen to my entreaties to her to write to her brother, telling him how miserable she had been at school, a statement I would promise to confirm as her medical adviser; and if he sent for her back, to go home to him, at any rate for a year or two, till she was older, and I (deceptive phrase!) better able to marry.

'This was my plan; but, alas! for its success. I was met at the door by my old landlady telling me that the poor young miss was very ill—she had broken a blood-vessel the previous night; and only for my letter saying I was coming I should have been telegraphed for. Ah me! before an hour was out I knew more than she could have told me, and not of my own knowledge only, but of that of the local doctor for whom she had sent beforehand. The insidious disease, which had seemed only in its infancy when I attended her at the school, had made fearful strides during the last two months, and Dr —— only confirmed my own opinion when, laying down his stethoscope in the outer room, he said to me,—

'A hopeless case! The lungs almost gone already. She *may* live through the winter; but I doubt it. Get her out of London at once, and to some warm place; give her plenty of nourishing food and keep her from fretting or worry, and you may prolong her life a little, and ease the last weeks of it, but not the cleverest doctor in the world could save it, poor child! She must die.'

'And this was my one love, my sweetheart, Blümchen! From that moment, Mr Ashleigh, all thought of sending the poor child back to the school where she had been so neglected, or the home whence she had been driven, went from me at once and for ever, as did any lingering temptation that I might

have had to deal unfairly with the innocence that had confided in me. She was mine. Of her own will she had given herself to me, without one thought of evil in her childish, ignorant mind. And I accepted the gift as a sacred trust, and vowed before God to reverence it, and care for her as though she had been indeed the sister I represented her. As soon as she could be moved I took her down to Ventnor, engaged a kind old woman as her nurse, and established them in the warmest and prettiest lodgings I could find, with the understanding that she was still to pass as my sister, and that I was to run down to see her as often as I could, and write to her every other day.

‘One other precaution I took. The servant I had engaged for her could not read; and I told Amy that as the other doctor had said any excitement was very bad for her, she must promise me not to look at a sensational novel or a newspaper of any sort till I gave her leave. She was as docile as a lamb with me, and promised at once; and by that promise I guarded against her seeing any advertisements which her family might choose to insert in the papers for her; and still more against the announcement of my marriage whenever it might appear.

‘For I married Miss Vane very shortly afterwards, and we took up our residence in Surbiton. Thanks to my wife’s fortune, my embarrassments had been removed very early in the day; and even from the commencement I seemed to become so popular here, and we were so sought after, that Dr Brown told me before long that he thought his patients were getting fonder of the new doctor than of the old one.

‘Meanwhile, by the invention of a story about an old patient dying of a painful disease, and who would trust in no one but me, I continued to visit Amy at Ventnor every five or six days; and never without taking her a fresh supply of books, music, or dainties, while I surrounded her with every luxury that she could wish for to make the times of my absences pass more bearably.

‘She was wonderfully patient, poor child! The rapid growth of her illness had taken all the petulance and impatience out of her nature; and, secure in the possession of my love, surrounded with every evidence of it, she was more than content, and rested happily in the belief that when she was well, and it was “safe” for me to send for her, she could come back to me and we would be married.

‘To the day of her death she never knew or suspected that I had a wife already. Had she done so, I believe she would

have died on the spot ; but I deceived her in that, and in that alone.

‘I deceived my wife far more and in many ways. If you ask me whence the money came to maintain Amy Dysart, and purchase all the presents and pretty things I lavished on her, I answer plainly, from my wife’s funds, or the funds which should have been hers. With the natural generosity of a loving woman she had taken pains to give me all the power over them that she could ; and I used it in the way I have said. Since then I have paid back into her name nearly double the sums so spent. But that does not lessen the meanness of the deed, nor alter the fact that, while every day of our married life showed me more of her worth, and proved how well suited she was in every way to make a perfect wife to a far better man than myself, the very consciousness of the double life I was leading gave my manner to her a certain coldness and reserve which naturally hurt her pride and repressed the tenderness she would fain have shown me ; while all my loving words, my gaiety and fondness I kept for the sick girl, who day by day was fading gently but fast into the other world.

‘She died just as the summer was coming on. I had brought her back to London with the first warm days that I might be able to see her oftener, and had established her in a pretty furnished cottage in St John’s Wood, which I hired from a friend who was leaving England for a few months. I said it was for a lady patient ; and if the servants put us down as closer connections I did not care. They were from Devonshire, and though she still went by the name of *Miss* Hamilton, they altered it as often as not to “*Mrs.*,” and I believe chose to regard us as a runaway couple, and to fancy that it was my anxiety to keep the marriage a secret which made me only pay my wife such flying visits. What the other doctors thought whose aid I called in I did not inquire. They could do nothing for her ; nor could I. Her doom was sealed from the beginning.

‘The end came quite suddenly. She broke a second blood-vessel ; and the telegram sent to apprise me of it found me away from home and fell into my wife’s hands. It was written by one of the servants, and the wording confirmed the suspicions which, it seems, Mrs Hamilton had for some weeks begun to entertain. She sent it on to me at once, and then followed me to town ; and, unknown to me, was present at the death of the poor child who, however innocently, had robbed

her of the love which she, as my wife, had a right to consider her own.

‘Of what passed on my return home on that most miserable day, there is no need to say much. I would even then have told my wife the plain facts of the story whose final chapter she had seen ; but she refused to listen to me, and I cannot blame her. Appearances were too much against me, and I had deceived her too grievously for her to credit that I was innocent of the grosser unfaithfulness to her of which she believed me guilty. I owe it to her generosity, indeed, that she did not yield to her first impulse of demanding a separation and exposing the whole affair. That she refrained from doing so was entirely owing to her knowledge that such action on her part must lead to her husband’s total ruin, and the disgrace of a name which she had made her own. She consented after some time to condone her wrongs, on condition that I never made any allusion to them or the past by word or hint ; and from that day our life resumed its old outward appearance. How different it was in reality only God and we two can ever know !

‘Three months later when, our first baby was born, I did indeed trust that matters might mend. My sorrow for the dead girl, who, dear as she was and still is to me, was but a child after all, had softened by degrees, as my respect and affection for the woman—who was not only my wife but the mother of my child, and whose silent suffering touched my heart more than any reproaches—steadily increased. I tried hard then to bring about a fuller reconciliation between us ; but it was not to be ; as instead of the link between us which I trusted the babe to prove, my wife saw in it only a special gift sent to her from Providence as a substitute in the place of that which had been taken from her. It was painful to her even to see me touch the child ; and she was so ill at the time that I respected her feeling about it and ceased to argue the question, leaving it to her to reopen when time should have softened her resentment. Of my subsequent life I need say nothing, save that if I sinned as a man I have suffered as a man, and sorely ; but my sin was against the lady sitting here and listening to me—not the dead child long ago laid to rest in her quiet grave. With regard to Amy Dysart I hold myself guiltless even now, save of the folly of that early flirtation while I looked on her only as Blümchen, the nameless young concert-singer. You, of course, as a clergyman, will say I should not have played at lovemaking with her then ; and of course you will be right.

But if no young man had any worse follies on his conscience, I, as an elderly one at present, should not hold him very criminal.

'For that, however, as for her early death, it was in truth her sister-in-law, not I, who was accountable. A victim to hereditary consumption, and far too frail to bear this climate, she would have died at the miserable school to which she was banished, even if she had not met a sadder fate. All the difference that *I* made in it was that, for sorrow and loneliness I gave her love and care; for scanty food and fireless rooms, every luxury which could keep the flagging life within her veins; for utter neglect and unkindness the most careful, tender protection. I never saw a sad look on her face during the last eight months of her life, except when she alluded to her brother; and her letters, still preserved, are one constant joy-bell of thankfulness for the happiness I had brought to her. I have nothing more to say, and only this to give you.' He went to a small cabinet, and unlocking it took out the bag he had described, labelled "For Amy and Jenny Dysart."

'These are her jewels,' he said. 'She left them to her baby nieces, to be given them after their mother's death, or their marriage. You have told me of the former, so I make them over to you. Please convey them to their young owners, and believe that I regret almost as much as you can the trouble which, through this old wrong-doing, has fallen on the namesake of her who was the first sufferer by it. And now, Mr Ashleigh, I have detained you a long time. Don't let me do so any longer. I am here, as you know, whenever you wish to communicate with me, and you can make any use you please of the confession I have made to you.'

'I have no desire to make any at all,' said Lionel. He had taken up his hat, but, glancing at Mrs Hamilton, and meeting the almost sick anxiety in her eyes, he paused, and held out his hand with a sudden frank gesture to the doctor: 'To spread this story abroad at present could do no good to anyone, and would only give much pain to Mrs Dysart's daughters. Of that lady's bitter remorse for the part she played towards her young sister-in-law I have been a witness, and for yourself, Dr Hamilton, though I cannot—excuse me for saying so—hold you entirely guiltless, even by your own story, towards Amy Dysart, I agree with you that it is your wife whom your weakness with regard to that poor girl has most injured; and that if *she* is silent through her love for you I most certainly have no right to say anything.'

He bowed gravely to the lady as he spoke and went away, the doctor seeing him to the door. When the latter came back to the study after a few minutes, however, he more than half expected to find his wife gone, and was surprised to find her still there, standing by the table, with one hand resting heavily on it for support, and her dark eyes, heavy with unshed tears, fixed on him with a kind of dumb, painful entreaty as he entered. The colour came into his face, and he went up to her and put his hand on her arm, saying gently,—

‘You are tired, Helen. This has been too much for you. Hadn’t you better rest?’

It was the old kindly voice which no aggravation had ever been able to harden, the old kindly look on the worn, handsome face, the lines in which seemed to show more sharply to her in that moment than they had ever done before. He was very near her just then, her cheek almost brushed his shoulder, and with a sudden, yearning impulse of wifehood, oversweeping and overpowering all the long-nourished sense of wrong and treachery, all the bitter crust of pride with which for years she had been fencing in her aching heart, she let her head droop upon his breast and clasped her arms round his neck, whispering the one word, ‘Forgive !’

‘Forgive *you*?’ said the doctor hoarsely. ‘My poor wife, do you think I don’t know how you have suffered, or that the wrong I did you is no less for being an old one? But, my dear, we are getting too old now, and the little ones upstairs are suffering too, through us. In God’s name, and for their sake, let there be peace between us. My love has been waiting for you any time these dozen years. Is it too late, wife, for you to care to try it?’ and then he took her to his heart and kissed her.

There were no more words needed.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TRACK OF THE SETTING SUN.

‘I THINK it looks very like it,’ said Lady Ashleigh; ‘and if it had not been for the other— Ah dear! dear! that was a sad affair. Poor Sybil was always such a favourite of mine; so pretty and gentle, and—and easier to understand than Jenny.’

'Much easier,' said Mrs Ashleigh promptly; 'a mental calibre of the simplest order. I don't wonder at your preferring her to Jenny, Margaret; but all the same, now you have taken a fancy into that dear good head of yours, don't run about sowing it in others. I should be sorry for it to get wind here.'

'But supposing it should be true?' suggested Lady Ashleigh rather timidly. Good-tempered and easy as she was, she was always a little afraid of her sister-in-law. Rose said such sharp things, and, like Jenny Dysart, one could not always understand her. On the present occasion she knitted her brows and looked quite cross.

'If it should be true, I should have gained a real daughter instead of an adopted one; only in that case she would live away from instead of with me. As I am desperately dull, however, and should rather like to have a daughter in the house if I'm to have one at all, I don't want to suppose anything that would take her out of it.'

'Oh no; of course not,' said Lady Ashleigh quickly; 'I am sure, however, that Jenny would have too much good feeling to—' and then, not being quite sure of what the good feeling was to deter Jenny from doing, or in what direction Mrs Ashleigh's disapproval extended, she broke off her sentence, and occupied herself more assiduously in picking the dead leaves off a camellia.

It was a day just at the close of March, that 'roaring moon of daffodil and crocus,' and the two ladies were standing inside one of the greenhouses at Dilworth Hall. Lady Ashleigh wore her ordinary indoor dress with only a white knitted shawl thrown over her head and framing the pleasant, blooming freshness of her motherly face; but the rector's wife was dressed in her outwalking costume of dark cloth bordered with fur, and when she made her appearance at the Hall a few minutes earlier she had told her sister-in-law that she was only waiting for her brougham, as she had promised to drive into Esher to see the Dysart girls and meet Lion, who, now the vicar of a Hampshire parish, was down on a few days' visit to his parents at Dilworth. The day before he had gone up to town on business; and as he was to bring down with him an invalid's bed-rest that Mrs Ashleigh had ordered for Sybil, it was arranged that he should get out of the train at Esher, and that his mother should drive over there, and bring him back.

It was a glorious morning. As the two ladies came out of the greenhouse and strolled along the gravel walks, the strong

pure breeze, fresh without being in the least chilly, caught Lady Ashleigh's knitted shawl and spread it out behind her like a cloud, as though to emulate those long, white, feathery ones chasing each other in swiftly flying ranks across the glittering blue above. All around, the thorns and lime-trees were beginning to be budded over with a tender outlining of green, while the almonds, rejoicing in their priority, burst out in great bunches of pale-pink bloom, showing delicately clear against the brown stone terraces and faded red brick of the old manor house, and contrasting with the dark leafless tracery of the stouter oaks and beeches. All the borders were alive with crocuses, yellow, purple and white; every bank a bed of primroses looking as if the pale gold sunshine diffused over the lap of nature had slumbered there a moment and left the earth a-blooming for its impress; while down in the meadow, which a few weeks back were white with snowdrops, 'the firstborn flower of the year,' there raged a sea of daffodils breaking their golden bloom against the swaying spears of their sea-green leafage, and 'taking the winds of March with beauty.'

All nature seemed dancing and singing in the uproarious joy of early springtime. The very lambs, brave to boldness at being born into such a merry madcap world, tried not to shiver when the mischievous wind caught them and turned their woolly fleeces flat against their sides, but fell to butting each other and playing uncouth gambols, in which their widespread, clumsy, little black legs seemed to jerk about quite irrespective of the rest of their bodies; and in every sunny nook and grassy place

The daisies pied and voilets blue,
And ladysmocks all silver white,
And cuckoo buds of yellow hue,

dappled the green sward with delicate mosaics. Even the two matrons pacing the terrace walk—though on the autumn side of life themselves—showed in the calm and comely maturity of their stately womanhood no sign of the waning sadness of autumn's days, but bore themselves bravely, as women with good husbands and children, clear consciences and pleasant homes, have a right to do: Lady Ashleigh indeed, though the elder by some years, looking the sunnier of the two. The rector's wife had a tiny fold of anxiety on her brow, and she stopped once or twice to glance towards the gate.

‘The carriage ought to have been here by now,’ she said.

'I wonder how I shall find her to-day. Lovely as the weather is, there is a touch of east in the wind still ; and I never go over there now without the fear lest *something* may have happened since I last heard.'

'Poor child !' said kind Lady Ashleigh, sighing. 'It's sad to think that such a young creature should be drifting out of life just when the world begins to look gay and spring-like. I wish they were nearer to us ; but Jenny says both the doctors declare she is too weak to bear moving, and that she is happier there than in places which would remind her more of her old life. Ah dear ! how bright a one it seemed likely to be once ! I hardly wonder, as things are now, at her being so content to go. Rose, I wish you had been driving over to-morrow instead of to-day ; I could have sent some more of that clotted cream that she likes. I've not got any this morning.'

'I should have done so, if it had not been for Lion's coming down to-day ; and though I don't see what Mr Jacobson should be doing on the Esher line, I don't feel as if it were safe to trust my young man at any railway station within a dozen miles of Epsom since he has become such a warlike character.'

'Ah ! I've often meant to ask you more about that,' said Lady Ashleigh, turning round from picking a spray of yellow winter jasmine to add to the bouquet she was carrying, with a sudden air of interest. 'Of course I heard about it at the time, for William wrote to me as well as you ; but what with being so taken up with Ada and her baby, and that smoky London air, which always confuses my head, I don't believe I have ever had a clear idea of the whole story. Lion thrashed this Mr Jacobson, or knocked him down—which was it?—for telling lies about poor little Sybil ; but how came he to hear of them, and what brought about the meeting ? The man must have been a thoroughpaced scamp, of course ; but still it seemed a little—Well, of course, Will would have done it in a moment ; but then Lion being a clergyman— However, I suppose he was too indignant to stop to think.'

'Oh dear, no, I don't think so,' said Mrs Ashleigh, the more lightly for a certain proud glistening in her eyes, of which she was a little ashamed. 'The fact is, he was rather out of conceit with himself at the time, and wanted a bit of excitement to set him up again. He had been so terribly cockahoop a little while before at his success in clearing up those slanders about Sybil and Mr Vane, and in actually finding out, while doing so, all about that poor young aunt of the girls, who disappeared

so mysteriously while they were still children in Austria, that he began to think his exertions all-powerful, and himself a sort of *deus ex machina*; and when he found out that no one wanted to hear his explanations, and that the very people who had bestirred themselves most busily in spreading falsehoods about our poor child were most indifferent to their refutation; while his very energy in defending her, damaged its own aim by strengthening a rumour which had got about, that he was as much in love with her as ever, and only fighting her battles for that reason, he got proportionately disappointed, accused himself of failing in everything, and would have liked, I'm afraid, to have sworn at the whole crew. I told him I had expected nothing else, that it was not his fault, and that once a girl had been talked about no counter-talking could ever undo the mischief done her, or leave her where she was before. But my lord was rather sore about it, and I suppose it was still rankling in his mind when he went into Leatherhead that day. I had asked him to call at the railway station for a parcel, which my stupid bootmaker had addressed there by mistake, and he was waiting for the train to come in which was to bring it when he overheard this Matt Jacobson talking about Sybil. The man was lounging against the bookstall, in company with a couple of horsey-looking friends, also apparently waiting for the train, and his back was turned to Lion; but he spoke so loud that his words were distinctly audible, and the boy heard him boasting of having helped to break off Gareth Vane's engagement to Miss Dysart, declaring that she was a fickle, worthless, little jade, who had played his friend as false from the beginning as she had done her parson lover before him, and gone back to the latter as soon as the former's back was turned; and that he himself had caught the two spooning and sentimentalising in a country lane, while the young lady was supposed to be engaged to his friend; and he had written to Mr Vane in consequence and told him of it. What he might have gone on to add, I don't know. Lion only held himself in long enough to hear that much, and then made but one stride forward, took hold of Jacobson by the back of his collar, saying—

‘Mr Jacobson, you are a liar and a coward, and every word you have been uttering is an impudent falsehood,’ and shook him till his teeth rattled in his head, flinging him off at the end as if he had been a dog. The man was so taken by surprise, and so helpless in our boy's grip—you know what a wrist he has—that he hardly made an effort to resist, and fell all in a

heap on the platform when he was let go ; but Lion turned round to the other two, and said, as calmly as possible,—

‘ Gentlemen, I don’t know if Mr Jacobson is an intimate friend of yours. If so, I’m sorry to have had to handle him so roughly before you ; but men who slander women in public places must expect to be publicly punished, and I tell you to his face, that all that he has been saying of a fatherless and motherless girl now lying on a sick-bed, and very near to death’s door, is a foul and gratuitous lie. I am the clergyman he alludes to, and I have never even once *seen* or spoken with Miss Dysart since the day of her engagement to his friend six months ago—an engagement to which, I believe, she is as true now as then. I say it to you on my word of honour as a gentleman ; and I dare him to contradict me.’

Mr Jacobson faltered out,—

‘ Well, if *I* didn’t see you together, my little girl did, and I heard—’ But Lion cut him short by laughing in his face, and turned to the other two with,—

‘ There, gentlemen, you see his story is altering already ! I leave you to believe him or me, which you please ;’ and, lifting his hat, walked away and left them : Jacobson stammering curses after him while he brushed the dust off his clothes.

‘ I wonder, in such a small place, that the affair didn’t make more fuss and scandal than it did,’ said Lady Ashleigh. The rector’s wife nodded.

‘ So do I ; but fortunately it wanted some minutes to the arrival of the train, and the only other witnesses of the scene were the old porter, Thompson (who used to be a servant of ours), and his son, who is the boy at the bookstall. Thompson came forward at once, pretending to think Mr Jacobson’s foot had slipped, and doing all that he could to make him keep quiet ; but, indeed, we heard afterwards that the wretched man was so much mortified at the view his friends took of the matter, and so fearful that Mr Vane might hear of it and take it up on his side, that though he blustered a good deal at first, he was more anxious than anybody to hush it up ; and even paid the newspaper people not to put in a paragraph about it.’

‘ I can’t help being glad, for dear Lion’s sake, that he did,’ said Lady Ashleigh.

‘ Lion didn’t care one way or another,’ retorted his mother ; ‘ he said if he had known he should be unfrocked for it he should have done it all the same ; and he went down to W—and told the bishop about it himself.’

'And I heard the bishop was very kind,' put in the baronet's wife ; 'but then he knows *us*.'

'And he knows Lionel too, which is more to the point. He listened to him quite quietly, and then said,—"My dear Mr Ashleigh, this is very wrong, you know. To knock a man down is unchristian and illegal in anyone, but in a clergyman it is unseemly into the bargain. Now, don't be tempted to do it again, or, as your diocesan, I shall be obliged to reprimand you severely. In the present instance, as you have made this statement to me of your own accord, I shall receive it as *sub sigillo confessionis*, and reserve any further censure till I hear of it from other quarters." Then he asked him to dine with him ; and Lion came home next day and got a far worse lecture from his father. You know how much the rector thinks of "respectability :" he positively insisted on taking Lion's duty for him next Sunday.'

'Ah ! John thought he was wrong too,' said Lady Ashleigh ; 'but as for Sir William, my dear, I think he was delighted. He vowed Lion was a chip of the old block, drank his health at dinner, and sent him a present of his own gold-headed hunting-whip to keep his hands clean another time. Lion is a great favourite with his uncle.'

'And with his mother, I'm afraid,' said Mrs Ashleigh, smiling. 'However, I will own I was glad that poor old Mr Brisbane's death occurred just then and gave him the move he had been waiting for. And now as the carriage is waiting for me, and I don't want any more fighting to-day, I'll be off. Are those flowers for Sybil ? Thanks. Dear me, I have talked myself quite hot !'

But there was no sign of heat or excitement in her manner when, later in the same afternoon, she entered the cottage bedroom where Sybil Dysart lay dying ; the little room which, however humble, always looked so exquisitely neat and dainty, with its latticed casement and curtains of snowy dimity, the well-filled bookcase and bowls and baskets of fresh flowers set about everywhere ; and the sweet girl face lying back among its white pillows before which no raised tones or angry word were ever suffered to be heard. Jenny was seated beside the bed reading aloud when Mrs Ashleigh came in, and rose gladly to welcome her ; but the only greeting which passed between these two was a kiss, and a mute question and shake of the head, which said as plainly as words, 'Any change ?' 'None.'

Sybil's face, however, grew beaming, and she put up her lips to be kissed, saying with the prettiest little petulant accent,

‘Jenny, the “person of the house,” *ought* to be spoken to first! Dear Mrs Ashleigh, how good it is to see you! Do you know I have been feeling so much better to-day, and the sunshine has been so lovely. I was half wishing you would come over.’

‘And I have been wishing to come here before, dear child, but you know how troublesome the rector’s bronchial tubes are in an east wind. I daren’t leave him. How are you, however? Really better?’

‘To-day, yes, ever so much. One can feel the sunshine even in bed; and besides, when Jenny lifted me up I could see it glittering on the common, and all the gorse breaking into bloom, and the cloud shadows chasing each other about till I almost wished I could be out in the lanes primrose gathering. Are there very many this year, Mrs Ashleigh?’

‘More than ever, I think, my dear; the banks were yellow with them as I came along.’

‘Then mightn’t Jenny go out for a run and gather some while you are here? She is looking so pale—yes, Jenny, you are—and she hasn’t been out for a whole week. Do make her go.’

‘That is just what I was meaning to do,’ said Mrs Ashleigh, smiling, ‘for I noticed those pale cheeks directly I came in. Put on your hat at once, Jenny, and get a good race in the breeze. Nonsense, child! Do you think I came to talk to *you*, or that I can’t take care of your sister just as well as you can? She will be quite glad of a change; won’t you, Sybil?’

But though Jenny laughed and said she didn’t doubt that, she still lingered, and even after she had her hat on, came back and hung over Sybil, smoothing and arranging her pillows for her till Mrs Ashleigh said, quietly,—

‘By the way, Jenny, if you take the path across the common to the station you will most likely meet another friend coming here. Lion has been staying with me for the last few days, and went up to London yesterday; but he is to come back by the five o’clock train, and we arranged to meet here and go home together.’

Jenny lifted her face quickly enough, and with such a sudden glow and sparkle lighting up its pallor, such a flash of utter surprise and gladness as did not need Mrs Ashleigh’s keen glance to discover; but there was no embarrassment or confusion in it, and she kept it fully turned on her friend as she said, in the frankest tone of pleasure,—

'Lion! That is nice. Why, it is three months since I saw him—not since he became a vicar. Mrs Ashleigh, how does he really like it? How is he looking? Oh, but I shall see that for myself. Of course I will go that way; it will be pleasant to have a talk with Lion again.'

The two left alone did not talk much. Mrs Ashleigh took up a piece of Jenny's work which was lying on the table, and began to sew at it, pausing now and then to stroke the invalid's hair, or tell her some little anecdote about the village people in her old home; and Sybil lay looking at her and sometimes smiling, sometimes answering a word or two, but evidently too weak for much exertion, and tired already by the little she had made.

She was dying fast, as anyone could see who looked at her. Swiftly and gently as the first Amy Dysart had gone, gliding down the steep incline to the river of death; peaceful and happy too, like that first Amy in her ending, though unlike her in having lost the one she loved best, and therefore more content to leave a world in which he no longer existed for her. In truth, since she had known Gareth was married, and that his apparently wanton desertion of her had been caused, not by mere heartless fickleness, but by the falsehoods of a person who had persuaded him that she was untrue to him, Sybil's grief had been healed of half its bitterness; and those who watched her noticed with thankfulness how by degrees her blue eyes lost that look of hopeless questioning, her mouth that painful tension which had altered its placid sweetness so pitifully before. Heart and brain might cease wearying at last as to the meaning of that cruel letter. He had been deceived, that was all; not recklessly wicked. Perhaps even he had loved her a little all the time and—he was happy! What could she ask more, when even had she had him by her side there was hardly enough life left in her to bid him farewell? To-day, after a longer pause than usual, she startled Mrs Ashleigh by saying,—

'When I am gone you will take Jenny away at once, will you not?'

'My dear child, yes. You know it. Haven't I told you that she shall be as my own child—the daughter I have always wanted? We could not have a dearer one.'

'I know it, and I am so glad. Dear old Jenny! she will be very happy with you; and she deserves to be happy, for her life has been such a dull, sad one of late, and she is so brave

always, so good and cheerful and unselfish. I am only afraid—What are you looking at?

‘At them—Lion and Jenny; here they come. Stay, let me raise you, dear; do you want to see them too?’

The bed was near the window, and from her seat by the former Mrs Ashleigh could see the broad expanse of Esher Common, russet green, and crossed at present by level stripes of gold where the setting sun had swept it with its fiery plough-share. There were geese feeding about, and the mellow rays had touched with red their white plumage, and flushed to flame all the little pools of rain-water which laughed and sparkled in the ruffling wind, while right across the level turf in the track of one of those golden sun-rays there were coming two figures, Lionel and Jenny: he, broad-shouldered and strong-looking, carrying on his shoulder some awkward-looking machine (‘just like a navvy,’ his mother muttered to herself, and with the matter-of-fact ease of one); she, tall and slim (alas! the past year of nursing and watching had not improved Jenny’s appearance—she still showed no signs of ‘filling out,’ as Lord Dysart put it), walking at his side with a brisk, elastic step, her face turned up to his; happy both of them in each other’s company. Sybil, propped on Mrs Ashleigh’s arm, and watching them with wistful, glistening eyes, felt a sudden thrill at her heart. What if Jenny should have found the prize which she had thrown away, and yet, through *her* fault, be debarred from enjoying it? The hectic in her cheek deepened at the thought.

‘Do you know,’ she said, her voice trembling in spite of her as she pointed with one little wasted hand at the two, ‘what I was thinking of when I said that I was afraid of something? Oh, Mrs Ashleigh! look there. Can’t you guess?’

The rector’s wife smiled.

‘Yes, Sybil, I think I can,’ she said, quietly. ‘I have seen it coming for some time. But, my child, why do you say “afraid”? Would it pain you if it were so?’

‘Pain me! Oh, how can you ask? But I feared you would not like it: that you would think of me, and remember how I had treated him, and—’

‘My dear Sybil, I thought we had agreed never to speak of that again.’

‘Only this once, for Jenny’s sake. Mrs Ashleigh, you don’t know how good and faithful she is—how different to me. When she loves once she will never change, and I think she has always loved him. He has always been her hero since she

was a baby, and though she does not even think of it in that way—she is too innocent, and thinks too little of herself—if he *were* to care for her—'

'As I believe he has begun to do without knowing it. My dear Sybil, why are you crying? What are you frightened at? Do you know what I was telling Lady Ashleigh just before I came out? If it were so I should gain a real daughter instead of an adopted one, and I shall love her just the same in either case. Child, Jenny is quite safe with me.'

She had laid her hand soothingly on Sybil's cheek, and Sybil drew it down to her lips and kissed it.

'Lay me down again,' she said, faintly. 'I am quite happy now. Oh, Mrs Ashleigh, I think you are the best woman in the world!'

Jenny came in with a quick, soft step a moment later, and a face quite rosy from her walk, and looked alarmed at the sight of tears in her sister's eyes; but Sybil only laughed and dashed them away with a wilful hand. It was the sun dazzling her, nothing more; but she would not have it shut out, she liked it, and she was quite well—quite well and happy. Wouldn't Jenny take Mrs Ashleigh away and give her and Lion some tea? She was sure it was ready, for she had smelt Mrs Mather-son's tea-cake cooking for some time. It was such good cake, too, it oughtn't to be let spoil; and then, just as they were leaving the room, she called Jenny back, and put up her face to be kissed, bidding her 'mind and take care of Lion and give him everything he wanted.'

But when she was left alone the smiles in her eyes gave place to a wistful sadness, very pitiful in one so young. She could hear their cheerful voices below, Lion's deep tones, and Jenny's laugh, sweeter now for being so rare. It was pleasant to hear them, pleasant to know that her one anxiety had been removed, and that when she was gone there might still be happiness for the sister so dear to her. *He*, too, was happy and rich. It was best as it was: far, far better than the old dream could ever have been; and he had loved her—*once!* Very slowly and feebly her fingers searched under the pillow till they found a tiny pocket-book, and drew from it the last letter but one he had ever written her. That cruel final one she had burnt long ago; but this was different. She could read this and feel that he had loved her while he was writing it. To-day, however, the golden sunshine in her eyes dazzled her, and the words seemed to swim in it. She could just

make out the first ones: '*My darling little white lily*,' all the rest was a golden mist; and, too weak for further effort, she turned her cheek round and tried to kiss the words she could not see.

So they found her when they came into the room ten minutes later, lying in the sunshine with the letter pressed to her lips, only there was no breath in the latter. She was dead!

THE END.



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